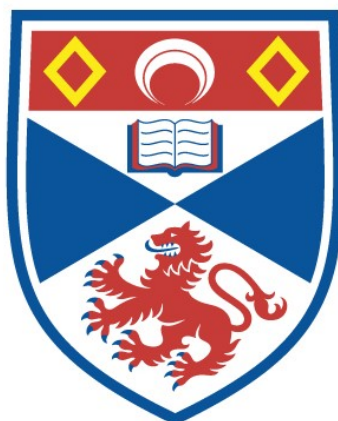


GENRES INSTABLES: LUDIC PERFORMANCES OF  
AUTOFICTION IN THE WORKS OF CATHERINE CUSSET,  
PHILIPPE VILAIN, CHLOÉ DELAUME AND ÉRIC  
CHEVILLARD

Morven Fraser

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
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*Genres Instables*: Ludic Performances of Autofiction  
in the Works of Catherine Cusset, Philippe Vilain,  
Chloé Delaume and Éric Chevillard.

Morven Fraser



University of  
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews

5<sup>th</sup> March 2015

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## Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Theoretical Frameworks .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Genre creation and the problem of stability .....	9
Autobiographical beginnings.....	14
Autofictional continuations .....	16
Ludic potentiality of autofiction .....	34
Performative autofiction .....	40
Autofictional corpus .....	49
<b>Chapter 1: The Porous Limits of Autofiction in the Autofictional Works of Catherine Cusset.....</b>	<b>55</b>
The problem of referentiality.....	56
Paratext and extra-textual information .....	62
Referentiality and photographs.....	69
Gender constructions .....	75
Motherhood .....	76
Explicitness.....	82
Conclusion.....	89
<b>Chapter 2: Melding Theory and Practice in the Autofictional Works of Philippe Vilain.....</b>	<b>91</b>
Vilain's theoretical framework.....	92
Vilain and Ernaux.....	99
Ludic contradictions of narrative.....	105
Vilain and constructs of gender .....	111

Female characters .....	112
Masculinity .....	121
Conclusion.....	127
<b>Chapter 3: Repetition and Performance in the Autofictional Works of Chloé</b>	
<b>Delaume .....</b>	<b>128</b>
Language and autofictional justification .....	131
Construction of the autofictional persona.....	131
Autofictional games.....	145
Problems of the body.....	155
Neutrality and otherness .....	157
Death and suicide.....	162
Conclusion.....	166
<b>Chapter 4: Parody, Banality and Innovation in the Autofictional Works of Éric</b>	
<b>Chevillard.....</b>	<b>168</b>
Blogs and the autofictional persona.....	173
Banality and autofiction.....	188
Constructions of masculinity and femininity .....	194
Chevillard's body .....	195
Female characters .....	199
Conclusion.....	207
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>213</b>

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## Abstract

Autofiction has been the subject of much critical investigation in France, yet little of this theory extends to contemporary texts. Furthermore, autofictional theory has, until now, neglected the study of ludic performance – an important feature within the genre –, and this thesis contributes to filling this gap in criticism. Through this analysis, I establish the genre's construction as well as the constitution of the autobiographical persona in the autofictional texts of four authors. I argue that in order for autofiction to be considered as a genre, ludic strategies and autofictional personae are critical factors in the genre's construction. I build on previous scholarship of autofiction before discussing the performance of autobiographical personae producing an autofictional body in the works of four contemporary French writers: Catherine Cusset, Philippe Vilain, Chloé Delaume and Éric Chevillard.

Each author is analysed in a dedicated chapter exploring their autofictional œuvres, yielding three key trends. These are: the proliferation of intertextual references, ludic representations of the genre, and the creation of an autofictional body by the reader through autofictional personae. In each chapter I examine the construction of these personae, revealing a separation between selfhood constructed in language and questions of the body, both of the autofictional personae as well as characters within the text. Other characters within the texts expose complex constructions of gender that range from a rejection of male characters to the homogenisation of female characters reduced to stereotypes. Depictions of the intimate sphere within autofiction, including relationships and gendered constructs, are analysed in order to situate autofiction as a genre. Through the discussion of autofictional personae pivotal in this conception of autofiction, this thesis posits that representations of the body – within and beyond language – are the key to understanding autofictional performances.

## Theoretical Frameworks

*‘Il faudrait, pour ce que j’ai à dire, inventer un langage aussi nouveau que mon projet.’<sup>1</sup>*

Perhaps one of the most famous phrases to appear in autobiographical texts, Rousseau’s wish to create a new form of language in order to write his autobiography has been echoed many times. His sentiment has become part of the make-up of autobiographical texts, whether in autobiography or in projects using part of the referential sphere to create autobiographical aspects to texts. The possibility of creating a new language to portray each individual author has been a strong lure, giving authors the possibility of creating original pieces and taking part in canon formation. Rousseau’s statement has also been used as a starting point for different genres, the most recent of which is autofiction. Despite the statement’s popularity, problems have always emerged with the possibility of writing new language within an existing linguistic framework, and autofiction’s emergence in 1977 gave new avenues to explore this intriguing concept.

Since Rousseau’s autobiographical beginnings in 1782, autobiography has grown to encompass a myriad of genres. Autofiction’s birth signals, however, an interesting development in the referential and theoretical sphere that surrounds autobiographical texts. Autofiction straddles the divide between fiction and autobiography, creating a new space in the zone between the two genres. Serge Doubrovsky, a Holocaust survivor and theorist originally dedicated to Corneille, published *Fils* in 1977. *Fils* discusses Doubrovsky’s sessions with a psychoanalyst and includes analysis of his dreams. The text is episodic, written in more than one language and features interruptions from the narrator himself. The text was created in part to prove a theoretical peculiarity originally created by Philippe Lejeune’s *Le pacte autobiographique*. Doubrovsky’s innovation in writing this text was to use his first-person narrator to narrate dreams and to introduce fictional elements into an otherwise autobiographical narrative.

Since its conception, autofiction has stimulated debate and controversy from those who deny its existence to those who enthusiastically support it. Whilst some have

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions* (Paris: Pléiade, 1959), p. 1155.



described autofiction as narcissistic,<sup>2</sup> autofiction's entry into the autobiographical sphere has created new forms of self-depiction. Further, an explosion of autofictional texts has ensured constant discussion in the media as to the origins of this genre as well as its place within literature. Autofiction's rise has also been informed and influenced by the rise of the Internet and many autofictional texts and projects have appeared online.<sup>3</sup> Despite this discussion and theoretical interventions to develop autofiction, there has been very little analysis conducted on the texts that are published under autofiction's moniker. Furthermore, perhaps as a result of the intense theoretical pressure, autofiction has no agreed categorical definition. The influence of Rousseau's new language for each project seems to have spawned a new definition for each new author, creating a confusing zone in which many discuss different forms of autofictional expression without consensus. Yet is autofiction really a new genre? And how can it be defined if there is a multitude of media involved in its construction?

This thesis does not seek to create a new definition for autofiction, although this has been a side-effect; rather, it seeks to understand how autofictional texts are constructed and performed. Furthermore, it seeks to understand how autofiction can be differentiated from other writing of the self, and how autofictional authors use the categorisations of different genres to establish their texts. Autofiction's beginnings and subsequent meandering through genre conventions and misunderstandings need to be fully understood in order to study the genre in its current form, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the problems of genre definition and autofiction is the proliferation of genres clustered around autofiction, not least of which is the autobiographical novel as well as autobiography itself. I will first discuss how a genre can be accepted as such, before going on to elucidate key factors in the development of an autofictional genre.

Autofiction, in differentiating itself from other genres is particularly adept at the transgression of boundaries. Indeed, Emmanuel Samé describes autofiction as 'une écriture du secret',<sup>4</sup> alluding to autofiction's close similarity with the content of autobiographical texts; autofiction often relates intimate episodes making generic distinction between autobiographical texts more difficult. Yet autofiction's generic status is built on the ability to identify discrete factors in its evolution and current state

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<sup>2</sup> Arnaud Genon, 'Introduction' *Autofiction(s) : Colloque de Cerisy*, 2008 ed. by Claude Burgelin, Isabelle Grell, and Roger-Yves Roche (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2010), pp. 5–21, (p. 9).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, 'autofiction.org', 2013 <<http://www.autofiction.org/>> [accessed 04 March 2015], a website set up expressly for critics of autofiction.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Samé, *Autofiction Père & Fils : S. Doubrovsky, A. Robbe-Grillet, H. Guibert* (Dijon: EUD - Éditions Universitaires Dijon, 2013), p. 14.

that can be seen in more than one text. I will focus more directly on the way in which the autofictional persona is treated in autofictional texts, and in particular on the autofictional body that has been created as the text within the four authors studied here. In the production of an autofictional character, authors inevitably access the referential aspects of their own constructions, and this study is concerned with the performance of these bodies in such a construct. Autofictional personae can be performed in a variety of contexts, and the involvement of different media within an autofictional setting could be seen as contributing to a new form of performance. Performance of autofiction, that is, following Judith Butler's view, speech acts and actions repeatedly performed to create a persona, can thus be seen as creating a representation of the body.<sup>5</sup> Shirley Jordan asserts that new women's writing in France is attentive to body constructs,<sup>6</sup> yet how is this referential sphere performed within the context of autofiction? According to Susan Bordo:

The body, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture.<sup>7</sup>

I will argue that the autofictional text has become a platform for the inscription of the autofictional body upon the text, and that the text has in fact become the embodiment of the autofictional persona created by the author. Yet is the attention driven solely by women, as it is sometimes thought, or are male writers also configuring their identities through their bodies? Can autofiction reveal new insights into discussions of the body?

One of the side-effects of autofiction is that the vast majority of autofictional texts appear to be written by women, and are fragmented in some sense, and yet so was Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils*, the original autofictional text. Autofiction is now viewed as women's writing, and yet intriguingly it is theorised almost exclusively by men. As Doubrovsky writes:

Il y a effectivement plus de femmes 'autofictionneuses'. Pour la première fois, elles peuvent s'assumer dans leur désir. [...] Les femmes ont besoin de se déshabiller et que ce ne soit pas toujours un homme qui le fasse,

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Shirley Ann Jordan, 'Close-up and Impersonal: Sexual/Textual Bodies in Contemporary French Women's Writing', *Nottingham French Studies*, 45 (2006), pp. 8–23 (p. 8).

<sup>7</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: feminism, Western culture, and the body* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), p. 165.

comme Zola avec *Nana* ou Flaubert avec *Madame Bovary*. Je crois que c'est une libération historique, quitte à choquer certains. Il y a un besoin de vérité.<sup>8</sup>

Doubrovsky links the rise of female autofiction writers with the rise of female libidinal space, a correlation that to some extent bears fruit in this thesis, through Catherine Cusset, although the case is more nuanced than Doubrovsky's reading would suggest. Theoretical autofiction and practical autofiction appear to be very separate spheres of influence, although there are some who cross from theory to practice and back again. This dichotomy does not hold true for male autofictional writers who appear to have more ability to move between the two spheres of interest, such as Philippe Vilain and Serge Doubrovsky himself.

By focusing on four contemporary authors – two male and two female – this thesis will seek to assess and challenge gendered divisions within autofictional production and practice. To this end, I have chosen Philippe Vilain and Chloé Delaume as exponents of autofictional theory as well as practice. Catherine Cusset represents a more 'traditional' form of autofiction, whereas Éric Chevillard has stretched the relatively new genre of autofiction to parodic proportions with the book publication of his online blog, '*L'autofictif*'. Each author will be studied in depth in order to analyse the creation of their autofictional persona through language as well as the ways in which their autofictional persona is inscribed in the text. To this end, I will first discuss the production of genre of construction, before moving on to the discrete factors that create an autofictional genre.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Mahler, and Serge Doubrovsky, 'Serge Doubrovsky : "Écrire sur /soi, c'est écrire sur les autres"', 22 February 2011, <[http://www.lepoint.fr/grands-entretiens/serge-doubrovsky-ecrire-sur-soi-c-est-ecrire-sur-les-autres-22-02-2011-1298292\\_326.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/grands-entretiens/serge-doubrovsky-ecrire-sur-soi-c-est-ecrire-sur-les-autres-22-02-2011-1298292_326.php)> [accessed 04 March 2015].

## Genre creation and the problem of stability

Autofiction's current contradictory status of both genre and sub-genre needs some investigation in order to assert one or the other. Theoreticians from Philippe Gasparini to Shirley Jordan have decided upon the classifications necessary in order for autofiction to either be a genre, or an autobiographical sub-genre. Debates about the legitimacy of autofiction have surrounded it since its conception, with Jordan writing that, '[a]utofiction, a particularly controversial sub-set of autobiographical experiment, further refines – and raises the temperature of – debates about legitimacy, writer-reader commitment, the ownership of experience and the nature and limits of invention in self-narrative'.<sup>9</sup> Jordan's starting point of autofiction, which is to see it as a strand of autobiography rather than as a new genre, is in itself a controversial statement. Conversely, Erman, publishing three years earlier than Jordan does not take the same view, writing:

Depuis qu'il a été créé par Serge Doubrovsky, en 1977, pour qualifier son roman intitulé *Fils* et rendre compte de réinvention du vécu, donc de la fictionnalisation de soi en rapport avec la matière d'une cure analytique dont le récit rapporte les séances, le néologisme *autofiction* a fait florès jusqu'à revendiquer, aujourd'hui la dignité d'un genre littéraire établi.<sup>10</sup>

This fluctuating status of autofiction, moving from a genre and a sub-set of a genre, creates differing sets of expectations within texts identifiable as autofiction.

Autofiction's lack of generic categorisation further enables authors and theoreticians to play with the ideas of the possible rather than be confined within one position. Before autofiction can be appropriately classified, however, it is important to briefly discuss the nature of genre before going on to theorise about the specificities of autofiction.

As Todorov writes, 'un nouveau genre est toujours la transformation d'un ou de plusieurs genres anciens : par inversion, par déplacement, par combinaison.'<sup>11</sup> In effect, Todorov's description of new genres therefore includes a period of adjustment in which new genres go through a process of creation, emerging in a grey space between established genres. In order to designate genres, Todorov describes as them as the

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<sup>9</sup> Shirley Ann Jordan, 'Autofiction, Ethics and Consent: Christine Angot's *Les Petits*', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine*, 4 (2012), pp. 3–14 (p. 3) < <http://www.revue-critique-de-fiction-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx04.01> > [last accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>10</sup> Michel Erman, 'Autofiction, autoportrait, autocitation' in *Autofiction(s)* ed. by Michel Erman (Toulouse: Éditions Universitaires du Sud, Champs du Signe, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, 'L'origine des genres' in *La notion de littérature et autres essais* (Paris, Seuil, 1987), p. 30.

codification of speech acts in a similar understanding as that seen by Bakhtin. Thus, a new genre can only be described as such if there are discrete factors that indicate its originality; it is not enough for a genre to be theorised or described. The genre must be performed on multiple levels in order for the genre to be treated as such. This period of adjustment creates friction between the old and the emerging genres, creating a proliferation of new texts as the friction gives licence to reform dominating genres. Of course, in order to have new genres, texts transgress existing structures within dominating genres. Todorov describes these existing structures as ‘horizons d’attente’<sup>12</sup> for readers and ‘modèles d’écriture’<sup>13</sup> for authors. The codification of genre then resolves into stability. Yet has autofiction achieved this stability? And if not, how can genre stability be achieved? Or can it ever be achieved?

For Derrida, genre implies the transgression of limits necessarily imposed. As Sheringham writes with regard to autobiography:

Just as important, however, is the indefinite spectre of genre, the internalized conception of what an autobiography is or should be. ‘Dès qu’on entend le mot ‘genre’, writes Jacques Derrida, ‘dès qu’il paraît, dès qu’on tente de le poser, une limite se dessine. Et quand une limite vient à assigner, la norme et l’interdit ne se font pas entendre : ‘il faut’, ‘il ne faut pas’, dit le genre, le mot ‘genre’ la figure, la voix ou la loi du genre’. The voice of genre makes itself heard in numerous ways in autobiography.<sup>14</sup>

Without transgression of the limits of genre, the genre itself cannot exist. Part of Derrida’s thesis rests on the ability of the text to categorise itself through visible marks, such as through marking texts as novels, or in a way that the readership of the genre can understand.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, according to Derrida, texts cannot be without a genre.<sup>16</sup> All texts belong to at least one genre, and they cannot escape or belong to no genre. In this context, how can autofictional texts be marked? Autobiographical texts are often marked with the very name of the genre, as are fictional texts, yet what reaction occurs when there is no such marking? Is the ability of the genre dependent on one marking, or can other paratextual information become important?

In contrast with autobiography, autofiction’s voice can be seen to be simply that in opposition; there is no fixed definition as to what it should constitute. Rather,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires: Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘La Loi du genre,’ in *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), pp. 249–87, (p. 253).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

autofiction has been defined as the grey area between autobiography and fiction,<sup>17</sup> never quite assuming the status of either. Yet autofiction's singularities are evident through the performance of the autofictional persona resulting in the embodiment of autofiction in the text.

Autofiction's lack of generic stability, which will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, gives rise to the notion that this is a genre still in flux, still to be fully formed. This is particularly evident in the over-theorisation of the genre created in tandem with the publication of texts within autofiction. This thesis aims to give some sense of autofiction using the texts that have been created already under the horizons of expectation understood by Todorov as the foundation of the genre. As each author has created their own version of autofiction, an overarching definition with specific horizons of expectation and models of autofiction have not yet been achieved. This suggests that autofiction is the rising medium in a grey area between autobiography and fiction which is also competing against more established genres such as the autobiographical novel. According to Tynyanov:

It then becomes obvious that a *static* definition of a genre, one which would cover all its manifestations, is impossible: the genre dislocates itself; we see before us the broken line, not a straight line, of its evolution – and this evolution takes place precisely at the expense of the 'fundamental' features of the genre: of the epic as narrative, of the lyric as the art of the emotions, etc.<sup>18</sup>

In Tynyanov's conception of genre, therefore, a final definition is impossible to create as a genre is inevitably reinventing itself over and over again. It should, however be possible, indeed necessary, to create boundaries of a genre that can coalesce around a clear standard with the understanding that these rules are in constant evolution. Indeed Perloff argues that, in relation to post-modern genres, 'the pleasure of the text being regularly seen as one of *transgression* and *contamination*, of what Derrida calls the play of representation.'<sup>19</sup> Autofiction's propensity to transgress the boundaries of both autobiography and fiction then becomes more difficult to categorise.

In the case of autofiction, it has perhaps been more difficult to pin down the specific codifications of the genre due to the ever-increasing range of media involved in

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<sup>17</sup> Claude Burgelin, 'Pour l'autofiction' in *Autofiction(s) : Colloque de Cerisy 2008*, pp. 5-21, (p. 5).

<sup>18</sup> Yury Tynyanov, 'The Literary Fact' in *Modern Genre Theory* ed. by David Duff (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 29-49, (p. 32).

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'Introduction' in *Postmodern Genres* ed. by Marjorie Perloff (Norman; London : University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), pp. 3-11, (p. 8).

the production of autofictional performances. This is best illustrated through the increasing use of the Internet, photography, sound clips and other media that combine into one autofictional performance. In using different media varieties, it could be argued that autofiction has lost the ability to be codified as a genre because of its origins as a purely written endeavour. Yet the appearance and usage of different forms of media do not detract from the discrete factors that constitute autofiction. Véronique Montémont in an article on the appearance of photographs in autofiction writes that, ‘the juxtaposition of text and photo turns out to be an excellent way of making an autobiographical text tip over into autofiction.’<sup>20</sup> Montémont’s argument suggests that, far from a disparate collection of media under an autofictional banner, autofiction’s development from the written text aids its genre creation. Montémont argues that with the appearance of photography in autobiography, the truth claims of autobiography through Lejeune’s pact has been transferred onto the photographic image.<sup>21</sup> Hughes and Noble concur that the ‘uniqueness of photographic textuality resides in the unassailably referential nature of the photographic identity’.<sup>22</sup> This transference marks one of the ways in which referentiality can be inserted into an autofictional text, yet Montémont also points to the ways in which photography within a referential text can be problematic. She writes, ‘It may be the case that the two modes, photo and text, which each present themselves as autobiographical, do not entirely match. ....[they] but rather hint at gaps, tension, or even conflict between the two media.’<sup>23</sup> Despite the truth claims that photography can hint at, Montémont also raises issues that photography and autobiography must overcome such as the authorship of the image. Photography within a referential construct, far from giving an easy referential sphere to access, presents a troubled medium. This trouble, however, adds tension into the autofictional construct, giving both fictional and referential aspects within one image.

Photographs are not the only medium to be used within an autofictional setting. Autofiction’s relative novelty coincides with the rise of the Internet, and autofictional authors have used different forms of media such as blogging and interactive social media on the Internet to exploit its potential. The incorporation of the Internet into a

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<sup>20</sup> Véronique Montémont, ‘Beyond Autobiography’ in *Textual and Visual Selves* ed. by Natalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell and Ann Miller (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp. 29-50, (p. 39).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble, ‘Introduction’ Alex Hughes and Andrea Noble, eds, *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), pp. 1–18 (p. 4).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

literary genre at first glance appears to confuse the literary status of autofiction. Yet this is not the case. As photography has enhanced autofiction's potential, creating tension and conflict within a changing genre, so the Internet can also be used to access fictional and referential spheres. Through an ever-greater web of intertextual references, readers can access information to strengthen the autofictional persona, tying the autofictional persona to the text.

Through the use of photography and accessing fictional and referential spheres, different media can enhance the tensions and problems within autofictional discourse. They point to varying access points of the referential sphere and simultaneously give the reader fictional and referential readings, providing autofiction with new avenues to explore. There has been a recent surge in critical interest in photography and autobiographical writings, as well as many more photo-fictions, one of which is discussed in greater detail in this thesis.<sup>24</sup> There has also been a corresponding surge in publications using photography as well as greater interest in using Internet images in autobiographical writing. This can be seen in Catherine Cusset's text *New York, journal d'un cycle*, discussed in the following chapter, but also in the works of other writers such as Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*, published in 2005 which chronicles her struggle with cancer. These texts create an interesting conundrum in autofiction due to their use of photographs and the implications that has upon the real, as seen by Baudrillard, and which will be discussed in the chapters to come.

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<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 1 for more on this.



## Autobiographical beginnings

As Burgelin wrote, autofiction is a genre, ‘qui sent le mélange et le compromis’.<sup>25</sup> Compromises and an approach that Arnaud Schmitt calls, ‘la mixité’, are everywhere in autofiction and reveal a genre that is at best in a grey area, and at worst, is broken into so many definitions that it can no longer be defined as a genre. Autofiction’s beginnings reveal a complex picture with competing definitions of the genre at every stage. Despised by some, most notably by Genette as a way to write autobiography without taking responsibility for the autobiography, and by others as narcissistic, the dangers of autofiction are notable. Genette writes that they are two types of autofiction. There are, ‘les vraies autofictions dont le contenu narratif est, si je puis dire, authentiquement fictionnel,’ and the, ‘fausses autofictions,’ ‘qui ne sont fictions que par la douane : autrement dit, les autobiographies honteuses.’<sup>26</sup> Genette’s charge of cowardly autobiography needs further investigation before this can be refuted, due in part to autofiction’s closeness with autobiography, traditionally besmirched with the same reputation.

Autobiography’s origins can be traced at least as far as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, published in the fourth century AD, yet as Boyle points out, academic discussions of autobiography did not begin until Georg Misch’s *Geschichte der Autobiographie* with the first volume published in 1907.<sup>27</sup> Landmark interventions in the genre are well-known, such as Rousseau’s *Les Confessions*, as well as more recent introductions such as *Les Mots* by Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet autobiography is notoriously difficult to define and has spawned numerous definitions in order to classify the genre. As Boyle writes:

The essence of autobiography as a genre of writing is that it connects the account that the narrating voice gives of itself – the insights, experiences and reflections that the narrator tells us are his or her own and which explain who he or she is – with a named real-life person, who is actually the author of the work.<sup>28</sup>

Autobiography’s problem with definition of the genre, however, lies chiefly in the relationship that exists between the narrator, author and main character, as well as the

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<sup>25</sup> Burgelin, ‘Pour l’autofiction’ in *Autofiction(s)*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> Claire Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

ability of that persona to connect with the reader. This persona, which shall be called the autobiographical persona in this thesis, can be part of the focus for understanding the truth claims of autobiography in some conceptions of autobiography. I will now discuss two very different forms of autobiographical theory in order to understand the genre, before going on to discussing the development of autofiction from autobiography.

Paul De Man's influential article, 'Autobiography as de-facement,' suggests that autobiography should be excluded from having genre status, and instead should be considered a mode of reading<sup>29</sup> rather than a genre. According to De Man,

Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighbouring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealingly of all, generic discussions, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.<sup>30</sup>

De Man's argument rests on the necessity of the autobiographical author dissolving his or her own identity within the text only to recapture his or her identity after the life has been written. The identity within the autobiographical text, therefore, is subject to the technical demands of writing the autobiography and introduces fiction to the referent. As such, De Man argues, autobiography cannot be seen as a genre and it is instead a mode of reading.

Meanwhile, Philippe Lejeune's intervention in autobiography in 1975 marked a turning point in autobiography's development and definition. Lejeune originally defined autobiography as, 'Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité.'<sup>31</sup> Lejeune's definition also included a list of criteria to be satisfied in order for the text to be considered autobiography which included the author being previously published, as well as the exclusion of any dream sequences.<sup>32</sup> In comparison with De Man's difficulty with the technical demands of autobiography, Lejeune's approach is a structured framework that proposes a set of categories that each autobiographical text can be measured against in order to determine the generic status of

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<sup>29</sup> Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement' in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 67–82 (p. 70).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–46.

the work. Each categorisation in *Le pacte autobiographique* is accomplished with the aid of a table<sup>33</sup> and depends upon a contract between author and reader as well as the coincidence between the author and main character's name. As Lejeune's contract makes clear, if all three resemble one another, the text in which this occurs can be described as autobiography, yet if one aspect of this is challenged, the text can no longer be seen as autobiographical.<sup>34</sup> Without this connection, the truth claims of autobiography are damaged, and the relationship with the reader is difficult to ascertain.

Since the publication of *Le pacte autobiographique*, however, Lejeune's definition has become more flexible. Indeed Lejeune's own definition of autobiography has become notably less rigid, with the publication of his *Signes de vie*, an updated version of his autobiographical definition.<sup>35</sup> As Sheringham notes:

If, following Lejeune, we choose to envisage autobiography as a contractual activity, it is important that we interpret this not only in terms of the attempt to cordon off an area in which certain general protocols of reading will apply, but as a recognition that the constant attempt to bargain, to negotiate, to engage with us is a predominant feature of the genre.<sup>36</sup>

Sheringham's contractual understanding of Lejeune's autobiography highlights the flexibility of autobiography, as understood in a negotiation. With the widening of the contractual obligations of Lejeune's definition, autobiographical writing began to encompass more texts previously under the moniker of 'writing of the self'. Yet within Lejeune's categorisations of both fictional and referential texts, there was already scope for self-writing texts such as the autobiographical novel. Within the spectrum of texts that stretch from autobiography to fiction, Lejeune's classification system created new categories for authors to exploit. One of these categories can now be understood as autofiction.

## **Autofictional continuations**

There is now very little debate about the origins of autofiction which are generally acknowledged to have been first theorized by Serge Doubrovsky. Marc Weitzmann's discussion in 1998 which attributed the beginnings of autofiction to Jerzy Kosinski's

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Signes de vie : Le pacte autobiographique 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2005)

<sup>36</sup> Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires*, p. 142.

*L'oiseau bariolé* was criticised by Philippe Vilain in his theoretical text, *Défense de Narcisse*, published in 2005. His comprehensive examination of the origins of autofiction reveals a lack of evidence for Kosinski's use of autofiction before 1986,<sup>37</sup> lending no weight to Weitzmann's claims. Instead, it is clear that Doubrovsky's use provides the first definition.

Autofiction's generic instability is not only grounded in the difficulties of assigning and designing a new genre, but also from the flexibility of its positions. Sheringham describes autofiction as, 'a species of text where the reader is teased and titillated as the author stages a masquerade in which truth and falsity, authentic recollection and patent fantasy, cease to be distinguishable.'<sup>38</sup> It is this melding of characteristics that allows the genre its flexibility and instability. One of the identities that must remain stable, however, is the autobiographical persona that has been taken from autobiography.

The relationship between author, narrator and main character is critical to autofictional writing. As Lejeune's contract makes clear for autobiography, if all three resemble one another, the text in which this occurs can be described as autobiography, yet if one aspect of this is challenged, the text can no longer be seen as autobiographical.<sup>39</sup> In this instance, the text can be supposed to be fictional in Lejeune's conception. Furthermore, new problems arise if no name is used in the text, or if the text is written in the third person, as the reader cannot be sure of links between this main character and the authorial persona. Yet this autofictional persona is at the very crux of any autofiction. Without it, the text can be categorized as an autobiographical novel, or as fiction. If the indices of fiction do not break the autobiographical pact, conversely, the text will become classified as autobiography. This tightrope enhances the dangers of autofiction. The autofictional persona is then crucially implicated in the performance of autofiction. Through the performance of this persona events in the texts unfold, and create new links, both autobiographical and fictional. Throughout this thesis I refer to this persona as the autofictional persona. This autofictional persona can be differentiated from the autobiographical persona through the ability of the author to change their name as it is possible in autofiction to use a pseudonym, as well as the performative ability of the autofictional persona to evolve in fictional situations.

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<sup>37</sup> Philippe Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse* (Paris: Grasset, 2005), p. 178.

<sup>38</sup> Sheringham, *French Autobiography Devices and Desires*, p. 328.

<sup>39</sup> Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 15.

In 1977, Serge Doubrovsky published *Fils*,<sup>40</sup> the first text to use ‘autofiction’ to describe itself as such. As Grell notes, Doubrovsky’s first mention of ‘auto-fiction’ is within the pages of *Fils* itself,<sup>41</sup> and it was originally hyphenated. The hyphen clearly depicts the two genres of autobiography and fiction being brought together and, with its loss, the word exemplifies an attempt to create a more cohesive practice. Doubrovsky’s reading of autofiction involves changing the form of a novel from a linear progression of narrative to a simulated stream of consciousness. Using events from his own life and the fruits of psychoanalysis of his dreams and aspirations, he put events together in such a way as to negate the narrative aspect of autobiographical text, implementing fragmentation strategies to develop a chaotic narrative. Doubrovsky used his text to reveal dissatisfaction with Philippe Lejeune’s *Le pacte autobiographique*, and in particular with the categorisation method used to identify both autobiography and fiction. Within the table, the possibility of a fictional pact between the author and reader, combined with a character that used the same name as that of the author, was proclaimed to be impossible. Despite this, Doubrovsky’s text sought to enter into this categorisation and he published *Fils* with the following statement on the back cover:

Autobiographie ? Non, c’est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l’on veut, *autofiction*, d’avoir confié le langage d’une aventure à l’aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres,  *fils*  des mots, allitérations, assonances, dissonance, écriture d’avant ou d’après littérature, *concrète*, comme on dit musique. Ou encore, autofriction, patiemment onaniste, qui espère faire maintenant partager son plaisir.<sup>42</sup>

Within this definition, Doubrovsky’s main focus is on autobiography with a fictional aspect rather than the converse. Throughout his text, the emphasis is placed on the re-ordering of information, and a fragmented style. Doubrovskian autofiction is predicated on the notion of an autobiographical character using ‘real events’ manifested through referential references, and then re-ordered. As Lejeune notes, the reader is left with the impression that the text will discuss real events, with real names adding to this impression.<sup>43</sup> Doubrovsky explains his conditions for understanding *Fils*, placing

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<sup>40</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1977).

<sup>41</sup> Isabelle Grell, ‘Pourquoi Serge Doubrovsky n’a pu éviter le terme d’autofiction?’ in *Genèse et Autofiction* ed. by Isabelle Grell, Jean-Louis Jeannelle, and Catherine Viollet (Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia, 2007), pp. 39–52 (p. 45).

<sup>42</sup> Doubrovsky, *Fils*, back cover.

<sup>43</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Moi aussi* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p. 64.

particular emphasis on language and the idea of play. Within *Fils* and Doubrovskian autofiction, play can be understood as playing with language and syntax, as well as playing with the expectations of the reader. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, play encapsulates the ways that autofictional texts engage the readership, creating more negotiations than those envisaged by Sheringham in autobiography.

Furthermore, one of the categorisations that Doubrovsky explicitly sought to avoid was Lejeune's condition of autobiography that the author must have published one text prior to the publication of autobiography. This condition excludes many of those who are not writers from the field of autobiography, creating a hierarchy between those who are permitted to write, and those who are not. His requirement renders autobiography an elitist occupation, one that Doubrovsky explicitly sought to counter. Doubrovsky's version of autofiction depends on the ability to write at any stage of life, and not at the end of one, as is generally assumed to be the case in studies of autobiography. In Doubrovskian autofiction, however, the ability to create texts from episodes, such as from one relationship creates the potential for a more episodic and fragmented text. This has indeed been the case for Chloé Delaume in this thesis.

One of the implications of Doubrovsky's understanding of autofiction in *Fils* is an attempt to destroy the traditional chronological nature of the text through fragmentation and reworking of narrative structures. A difficult linguistic environment has been created for the reader as a result of the fragmentation as well as Doubrovsky's use of three different languages. Readers are dislocated within *Fils*, and may be unable to follow the narrative structure, creating a more disruptive text. Chronological displacement is one way in which to counter problems of memory, as events can be transcribed from streams of consciousness, rather than an artificial imposition of order upon the text.

Autofictional writers studied in this thesis have used both chronological disruption as well as fragmentation to create destabilising texts within an already unstable genre. Yet autofiction is unstable due to a variety of factors, not simply the lack of consensus surrounding the definition. Autofiction's definition, whilst undergoing evolution and significant reworking since 1977, also seeks to disrupt genre conventions through multi-media texts as well as disruptions in language.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Deborah Gaensbauer, "'Autofiction + x = ?' Chloé Delaume's Experimental Self-Representations,' in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature* ed. by Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 212–224 (p. 215).

The use of psychoanalysis is crucial in *Fils* as the text is driven by conversations between Doubrovsky and his analyst. There are many problems with identifying this text with autobiography as outlined by Lejeune, including chronology and dream narratives, but the most problematic section has been discovered by Lejeune himself. Lejeune's exposure of Doubrovsky's own psychoanalysis of a dream, rather than those of his analyst, placed *Fils* in the fictional domain for him. Lejeune writes:

Sans doute aura-t-il quelque étonnement devant l'étonnement que j'ai éprouvé en apprenant que si le rêve central du livre était 'réel', (rêvé et noté par Doubrovsky), que si l'analyste était réel, en revanche jamais Doubrovsky n'avait parlé de ce rêve à l'analyste.<sup>45</sup>

Lejeune's discovery of this section gives a different view of *Fils* from the view that Doubrovsky portrays. The autobiographical component is not entirely lost, however, as Lejeune admits, because the dream did exist, as did the analyst that Doubrovsky uses throughout the rest of the text. Doubrovsky's use of the analyst in this sequence has been attributed to an expression of the analyst's possible interpretation, rather than accurate reporting of the interpretation.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, does the addition of one dream sequence without an analyst require a complete repudiation of the rest of the text as fictional? Indeed Perloff has claimed, '[a]s 'open systems' that can be understood only 'in relation to other genres' (Cohen 207), generic classes are inevitably fluid'.<sup>47</sup> In this manner, I would argue that the autobiographical pact has certainly been broken, and yet the pact that has been undertaken here is different. Doubrovsky's pact is more based on the idea of truth as separate from a faithful rendition of facts. Gasparini writes that Doubrovsky's pact should be understood as a 'strategy of ambiguity'<sup>48</sup> rather than as entirely faithful. I would contend that the intersection of referential and fictional pacts is at work in this text, and it is at the interplay between these two that autofiction lies. As Vilain attests, '[d]'un côté, l'auteur s'engage à dire la vérité ; de l'autre, il s'en dégage, même si, au final, dans ce double mouvement d'engagement-dégagement, le pacte romanesque, revendiqué, semble l'emporter sur le pacte autobiographique'.<sup>49</sup> Vilain's conception of autofiction calls for a definition of truth, which is discussed in the chapter dedicated to

<sup>45</sup> Lejeune, *Moi aussi*, p. 67.

<sup>46</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 208.

<sup>47</sup> Perloff, 'Introduction' in *Postmodern Genres*, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction : Une aventure du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), p. 300.

<sup>49</sup> Philippe Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie : Suivi de deux entretiens avec Philippe Sollers & Philippe Lejeune* (Chatou: Éditions de la Transparence, 2009), p. 12.

his texts, and further depends on an understanding of autofiction that is implicitly fraught with doubt as to the generic classification of the text. Hubier writes that, '[o]n le voit, l'autofiction serait donc, elle aussi, une affaire de pacte de vérité. Mais avec la certitude que celle-ci n'est jamais qu'une intention et non une réalité'.<sup>50</sup> Autofiction's emphasis on truth is therefore dependent on the authorial construction of truth rather than on factual truth. The specificity in autofiction lies in its non-conformity either to autobiography or to fiction, and yet in its concomitant reliance on their coding of genre. As Lecarme writes, '[l]e pacte autofictionnel se doit d'être contradictoire, à la différence du pacte romanesque ou du pacte autobiographique qui sont eux univoques'.<sup>51</sup> Autofiction's specific definition against both pacts sets it in opposition to both, and creates this contradictory pact.

In 1989, Vincent Colonna defended his doctoral thesis on the new genre of autofiction, creating an arch-genre of autofiction in which the definition of the genre was significantly expanded. Whereas Doubrovsky originally used autofiction as a new form of postmodern autobiography, fictionalising episodes and trying to escape from the problems of truth and memory, Colonna's definition became more all-encompassing. His definition was first posited in his doctoral thesis entitled 'L'autofiction (essai sur la fictionnalisation de soi en Littérature)'<sup>52</sup> and analysed texts published before Doubrovsky's definition in 1977. Colonna's analysis splits autofiction into four different categories including fantastical autofiction, biographical autofiction, mirror image autofiction and authorial autofiction, each with its own definition. Colonna explains all forms of autofiction under the following definition:

Tous les composés littéraires où un écrivain s'inscrit sous son nom propre (ou un dérivé indiscutable) dans une histoire qui présente les caractéristiques de la fiction, que ce soit par un contenu irréel, par une conformation conventionnelle (le roman, la comédie) ou par un contrat passé avec le lecteur.<sup>53</sup>

The autobiographical persona as understood by Lejeune and Doubrovsky is centred on the main character or hero of the text. Colonna's definition, however, does not depend

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<sup>50</sup> Sébastien Hubier, *Littératures intimes : Les expressions du moi, de l'autobiographie à l'autofiction* (Paris: Colin, 2003), p. 121.

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Lecarme, 'L'autofiction : Un mauvais genre ?' in *Autofictions et cie*, ed. by Philippe Lejeune, Jacques Lecarme, and Serge Doubrovsky (Paris: Université de Paris X, 1993), pp. 227-248 (p. 242).

<sup>52</sup> Vincent Colonna, 'L'autofiction (essai sur la fictionnalisation de soi en Littérature)' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, L'Université E.H.E.S.S., 1989) <<http://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/04/70/04/PDF/tel-00006609.pdf>>. [accessed 04 March 2015]. For the sake of continuity, I will be using the published text rather than his thesis, due to convention.

<sup>53</sup> Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires* (Auch: Tristram, 2004), p. 70.



on the main character or hero for the definition of autofiction. Instead, Colonna's interpretation allows for any character within the narrative to be claimed as autobiographical, raising the question of difference between autofiction and an autobiographical novel.

Colonna's definition of autofiction encompasses self-writing, rather than a specific form of such. His use of fiction to include 'unreal content' is also controversial. This type of fictional content would preclude any type of autobiographical content within that section of the text, and as Darrieussecq writes:

[...] je dirai que l'aspect indécidable de l'autofiction cesse, à mon avis, et tous au rebours de ce que disent Genette et Colonna, dès qu'un événement factuellement invraisemblable intervient dans le récit. Elle se transforme alors en roman à la première personne.<sup>54</sup>

Colonna's version of autofiction would thus seem to destroy autofiction's specificity, and relegate autofiction to a neologism with which to designate the autobiographical novel, a fact he himself is acutely aware of.<sup>55</sup> His purpose in this text, therefore, is to create an over-arching genre that fulfils the criteria of the autobiographical novel, whilst creating sub-divisions for them. Philippe Forest, in agreement with Colonna, traces the roots of autofiction before the neologism was coined by Doubrovsky, and in particular points to Céline and Blaise Cendrars to establish autofiction as a genre.<sup>56</sup> I will now briefly examine the four main categories of Colonna's arch-genre to demonstrate how autofictional theory works in this setting, before going on to examine further reference points within the genre.

[L'] 'autofiction fantastique'<sup>57</sup> is the first of these categories under scrutiny, and depends on the author as hero of the text, yet this main character is altered to become fictional and the events are fictionalised. This type of character, Colonna suggests, should not give any indications that the main character and author are in fact the same person.<sup>58</sup> Yet Colonna's definition of fantastical autofiction does not seem to differ greatly from a nominally fictional text; the only difference between texts that might be considered under this banner would be through authorial knowledge. In no way does the

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<sup>54</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, 'L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux', *Poétique*, 107 (1996), 368–380 (p. 378).

<sup>55</sup> Colonna, *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires*, p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> Philippe Forest, *Le roman, le réel : Un roman, est-il encore possible?* (Saint-Sébastien-sur-Loire: Pleins Feux, 1999), p. 68.

<sup>57</sup> Colonna, *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires*, p. 75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

reader perceive any difference at all. I would therefore reject it from the label of autofiction as having no practical application.

Secondly, he suggests biographical autofiction,<sup>59</sup> within which the author conforms to the autobiographical identity which posits the main character, author and narrator as different facets of the same entity. In these texts, however, the events surrounding the author can be fictionalised, although the onus is on providing as truthful an account as possible through referential indices or an autofictional pact. Referential indices are given through dates, facts and places. Again, Colonna extends his definition to include possibilities within biographical autofiction, such as creating an authorial legend and the use of the author's name within the text. It is echoed by Hughes who describes autofiction which 'may be understood as a narrative modality that inhabits the referential spaces likewise colonised by autobiography proper, but at the same time offers a patently enriched and treated, hence fictionalised, and metamorphic, version of the life-story of the *autofictionneur*.'<sup>60</sup> This form of autofiction is the most easily recognisable as approaching Doubrovskian autofiction, and can be understood as the main form of autofiction in use in contemporary autofictional theory and the basis for autofictional definition within this thesis.

Thirdly, Colonna suggests 'l'autofiction spéculaire'<sup>61</sup> in which the author is not necessarily at the centre of the text, but can be found in a portion of the narrative. According to Colonna, realism within mirror-image autofiction is a secondary pursuit, and the difference between autofiction and fiction within this category depends upon the insertion of the author in a small corner of the text, but this image of the author must reflect the author's personality.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, there is no element of danger and exposure that I argue is crucial in self-writing. As Philippe Vilain recalls with reference to Michel Leiris and 'De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie':

Tout le monde conserve à l'esprit cette fabuleuse métaphore de Leiris qui assimile la littérature à la tauromachie, à un *écrire* qui serait menacé par la corne de taureau. Sans doute l'autofiction relève-t-elle plus qu'un autre genre, en effet, d'une tauromachie symbolique.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> Alex Hughes, 'Recycling and Repetition in Recent French *Autofiction*: Marc Weitzmann's Doubrovskian Borrowings', *The Modern Language Review*, 97 (2002), pp. 566–576 (p. 567).

<sup>61</sup> Colonna, *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires*, p. 119.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>63</sup> Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 167.

Without authorial commitment – and authorial commitment cannot occur without the text’s protagonist as an integral part of the autofictional construct – there can be no autofiction. In mirror-image autofiction, there is neither such commitment nor any ways for the reader to perceive responsibility on any level and so the fictional pact remains unbroken.

Colonna’s final category of autofiction is ‘autofiction intrusive (autorale)’,<sup>64</sup> as the work becomes a third person narrative and the narrator is on the edge of the narration. According to Colonna, this authorial form of autofiction does not rely upon the main character, but rather on the existence of the narrator and the influence that this construct has on the text. This is a purely theoretical position<sup>65</sup> as Colonna himself admits, and there does not appear to be any way to reconcile his theory to autofictional practice. Although this presents an interesting thought experiment, it has no bearing on this thesis.

Although Colonna’s intervention in autofiction marked a turning point for the genre, it relies on a loose interpretation of writing of the self rather than a strict definition as such. Within his over-arching definition there are many different forms of autofiction, and, in the specificities, Colonna over-reaches the boundaries of autofiction. The section in which he describes biographical autofiction is perhaps the most useful in the search for a working definition of autofiction, and provides a useful starting point to distinguish autofiction from other self-writing genres.

As Ferreira-Meyers writes, autofiction’s meaning, ‘is neither stable nor unambiguous.’<sup>66</sup> Indeed, it is the thesis’s premise that this instability forms the basis for the genre’s definition. Yet how is this instability formed? And what constitutes instability? After Doubrovsky’s authorship of autofiction as well as Colonna’s definition, the word has come to be defined in a variety of ways that seem to encompass much of the autobiographical space involved in writing of the self. Autofiction’s contemporaneity and media presence have established that several authors including Nina Bouraoui and Annie Ernaux have refused the label, although for different reasons. Bouraoui stated in an interview that she did not understand autofiction,<sup>67</sup> creating more

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<sup>64</sup> Colonna, *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires*, p. 135.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>66</sup> Karen Ferreira-Meyers, ‘Historical overview of a New Literary Genre: Autofiction’ in *Auto/Fiction*, 1:1, 2013, pp. 15–35 (p. 17).

<sup>67</sup> Adeline Joutet, Nina Bouraoui and Sara Stridsberg, ‘Nina Bouraoui et Sara Stridsberg: “L’écrivain est un marginal”’ in *L’Express*, 9 May 2011, <[http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/nina-bouraoui-et-sara-stridsberg-l-ecrivain-est-un-marginal\\_990537.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/nina-bouraoui-et-sara-stridsberg-l-ecrivain-est-un-marginal_990537.html)> [accessed 24 June 2015]s.

confusion around the genre. Ernaux refuses the label of autofiction due to her understanding of autofiction as too close to fiction. In both of these cases, autofiction's status suffers from the confusion surrounding the genre, yet paradoxically, it is this confusion that enables the diversification of autofiction as well as its creativity. The status of the genre has been confused with that of the autobiographical novel, yielding genre cross-overs and productive openings.

After the publication of *Fils*, critical discussion began on the differences between both autofiction and the autobiographical novel as well as whether autofiction constituted a new form of postmodern autobiography. As Gasparini surmises, Jacques Lecarme and Serge Doubrovsky's vision of autofiction is that of an entirely new genre<sup>68</sup> whereas Philippe Lejeune's description of autofiction resembles that of the autobiographical novel. Lecarme and Doubrovsky, however, also agree on the use of psychoanalysis in autofiction, using autofiction as part of a writing 'cure'. Indeed Robson remarks that, 'literary critics [...] who advocate a writing cure have suggested that writing in the third person offers more space for self-revelation than writing in the first person.'<sup>69</sup> Indeed Lecarme further makes a case for a ludic version of autofiction<sup>70</sup> and distinguishes autofiction from autobiography through Lacanian analysis, writing in his article 'L'autofiction, un mauvais genre?' : 'Si la ligne de vie est une ligne de fiction, l'autofiction ne relève plus du bricolage chirurgical, mais d'une analyse bien conduite.'<sup>71</sup> For Lecarme, however, the main identity of the autofictional persona must be preserved, or the text will be designated as purely fictional.<sup>72</sup> This axiom is used to distinguish between the autobiographical novel and autofiction, creating the autofictional persona as integral to the genre. Yet is Lecarme's emphasis on the psychoanalytic sphere within autofiction justified in the texts that are being created currently?

Lecarme and Doubrovsky are not alone in using psychoanalysis for the basis of their understanding of autofiction. Régine Robin is also a prominent autofictional theorist using this tool for autofictional theory. Yet their approaches differ in the degree

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<sup>68</sup> Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 75.

<sup>69</sup> Kathryn Robson, 'The female vampire: Chantal Chawaf's melancholic *autofiction*' in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* ed. by Gill Rye and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 53–64 (p. 61).

<sup>70</sup> Jacques Lecarme, 'L'autofiction: un mauvais genre?' in *L'Autofictions et Cie* ed. by Serge Doubrovsky, Jacques Lecarme and Philippe Lejeune (Université de Paris X, 1993), pp. 227–249 (p. 227).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

of psychoanalysis undertaken in the texts. She wrote, ‘un autre leurre, extrêmement créatif, celui de la mise en place de l’identité narrative alors même qu’on la reconstitue dans l’écriture.’<sup>73</sup> Psychoanalysis is certainly an important strand within autofiction, yet the presence of psychoanalysis on its own would not be sufficient to delineate autofiction from other writings of the self. Psychoanalysis, therefore, in this thesis will not constitute a major marker of autofiction.

According to Gasparini, autofiction, ‘ne se donne pas pour une histoire vraie, mais pour un “roman” qui “démultiplie” les récits possibles de soi.’<sup>74</sup> Definitions of autofiction exist in a continuum with, perhaps, Doubrovsky’s original definition at the extreme of one subset of autofiction. On the other hand, Jones suggests that autofiction is simply, ‘a text in which author and protagonist bear the same name, but in which there is an overt attempt to fictionalise.’<sup>75</sup> Jones’ definition is the overarching principle of autofictional definition within this thesis, giving autofictional texts the continuum in which to exist. As Jones writes:

Autofiction is, perhaps, the ultimate terrain on which the competition between author theory and genre theory can be played out: it is a genre in which the uniqueness of the author is foregrounded not only in the form but also in the very content of the work, but which simultaneously has sought to locate itself within the genre system and thus exploit what Duff (2000: 16) terms ‘the power of genre’ from its very outset.<sup>76</sup>

One of the most delicate aspects of autofiction lies in its generic ambiguity, and the ease with which autofictional texts can be reclassified. It is in this state that autofiction can be seen to be the most problematic and the most unstable. Indeed, this is one of Lecarme’s preoccupations, although this is an issue not confined only to autofiction.<sup>77</sup>

One of the problems of genre definition and autofiction is the proliferation of genres clustered around autofiction, not least of which is the autobiographical novel. Philippe Gasparini has published two texts distinguishing the differences in autobiographical writings, creating comprehensive overviews of self-writing.<sup>78</sup> In both of these texts, he relies upon tables to explain the differences between categories of

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<sup>73</sup> Régine Robin, ‘L’autofiction: Le sujet toujours en défaut’ in *Autofictions et Cie*, pp. 73–86 (p. 83).

<sup>74</sup> Philippe Gasparini, ‘Autofiction vs autobiographie’ in *Tangence*, n° 97, 2011, pp. 11–24 (p. 15).

<sup>75</sup> E.H. Jones, ‘Autofiction: A brief history of a neologism’ in *Life Writing: Essays on Autobiography, Biography and Literature* ed. by Richard Bradford (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 175.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>78</sup> Gasparini, *Autofiction*; Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il je ? : Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

autobiographical writing, depending on the authorial construct and the pacts made explicit or implicit in the texts. In this section, I am particularly interested in his discussion of the differences between autobiographical novels and autofiction. Gasparini accepts the Doubrovskian view of autofiction in which the identity of the main character, narrator and author are assumed to be the same and this assumption is carried through the name of all three, whether through a recognisable pseudonym or exact replica of the name.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, autobiographical novels do not carry this assumption, and the main character's name does not correlate with the authorial persona.<sup>80</sup> According to Gasparini, the autobiographical novel and autofiction both use paratextual indicators as distinguishing markers, but differ in their use of the type of pact (fictional or autobiographical) as enunciated by Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique*. In this conception, the difference from the autobiographical novel to autofiction is seen through the pact structure. The autobiographical novel uses an ambiguous pact between the author and reader, whereas autofiction uses a fictional pact. In this construct, the autofictional persona is the critical distinguishing mark between the two types of life-writing.

Schmitt's distinction between an autobiographical novel and autofiction presents an intriguing difference. He writes:

La différence majeure entre les deux types [roman autobiographique et autofiction] vient surtout du fait que le premier recense tous les textes oscillant entre faits et fiction, ainsi que les lieux et figures leur permettant de créer cette ambiguïté ; le second, quant à lui, s'arrête principalement sur les écrits théoriques de ceux qui pratiquent ou s'intéressent à l'autofiction.<sup>81</sup>

Schmitt's distinction creates theoretical autofiction as the primary catalyst for autofiction and does not adequately deal with the differences because of the autobiographical persona. This sense of generic unease present in autofiction does not exist in autobiographical novels due to the autobiographical persona, lack of paratextual information surrounding the autobiographical persona, as well as the referential indicators within the text.

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<sup>79</sup> Alex Hughes, 'Recycling and Repetition in Recent French *Autofiction*: Marc Weitzmann's Doubrovskian Borrowings', in *Modern Language Review* 97:3, 2002, pp. 566–576 (p. 567). This is also the view taken by Vilain in *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 47; Gasparini, *Est-il je ?*, p. 27.

<sup>81</sup> Arnaud Schmitt, *Je réel/je fictif : Au-delà d'une confusion postmoderne* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2010), p. 65.

In my own conception of autofiction wherein the production of autofiction relies on the ability of the author to create the markers of autofiction, the autofictional persona is key in the differentiation of genres. I will use the autofictional persona as the critical marker of autofiction, and I will discuss in each individual author's case the construction and application of the persona.

Of course, in trying to define autofiction as an emerging genre, others have suggested that the very definition of the term would be to reduce its creative capacity. Indeed this is Jeannelle's argument<sup>82</sup> in his edited volume of autofictional theory which is advanced further by Damlé and Rye<sup>83</sup> in their edited volume of gendered autofictional theory. Jeannelle's use of a slippery genre relates a continuum of autofiction rather than an absolute definition.

In my own conception of autofiction, the reader is one of the key components of the definition, as the arbiter between fiction and autobiography. Furthermore, I hope to escape the traps of participation, as autofiction's specificity depends upon the reader being aware of two modes of narration – that of autobiography and fiction, and being unable (and unwilling) to decide between the two. Whether each individual enunciation of the text is fact or fiction does not matter in this conception. Instead it matters that clues are used to indicate one or the other, creating a plethora of references that become inherently indecipherable. Schmitt calls this approach, 'la mixité'.<sup>84</sup> In fact, Schmitt gives three possible approaches to autofiction. The first of these approaches is to deny its existence due to the incompatibility between reality and fiction.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, Schmitt moves on to, 'la mixité', in which he takes aim at those, like Darrieussecq or Ouellette-Michalska, who use autofiction's generic indecision as part of their definition. One of Schmitt's main objections to 'la mixité,' is that if the text were to be submitted to a fact-checker, '[l]e texte se retrouverait alors divisé en segments fictifs et segments référentiels, sans qu'aucune ambiguïté ne puisse entretenir la possibilité d'un genre intermédiaire'.<sup>86</sup> Yet this division of texts misses the very essence of autofiction: that the mix of referential and fictional indices creates a different type of text, and does not require the reader to know the provenance of either.

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<sup>82</sup> Jean-Louis Jeannelle, 'Où en est la réflexion sur l'autofiction ?' in *Genèse et Autofiction*, pp. 17-37.

<sup>83</sup> Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye, 'Introduction' *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> Schmitt, *Je réel/je fictif*, pp. 46-72.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-46.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

In my own conception of autofiction, the reader does not need to know precisely which aspect of the text is fictional or referential. Critical in this is the need for the autofictional persona to move between the fictional and referential spheres. Within this context referential and fictional pieces of information are mixed, providing the reader with a type of ‘reality-show’ literature. Both ‘je réel’ and ‘je fictif’ can co-exist within the same text, causing instability but not a rejection of either. Bignell’s analysis of the contemporary phenomenon of the reality-show can offer some insight into autofictional positions here. He writes:

[A]udiences are cynical about the truth claims of Reality TV programmes, place programmes along a continuum between fact and fiction, and give the greatest respect to what they perceive as the most factual programmes. [...] Audiences expect less factual information from docusoaps and programmes that they align with fiction, and believe that factual programming that borrows fiction conventions or style contributes less to their social learning. The self-critical attitude that audiences have to their own viewing of Reality TV and to the programmes themselves is informed by public discourses that have stigmatized Reality TV as trash TV.<sup>87</sup>

It is in this context of a knowing audience that I understand the claims of autofiction. In much the same way as reality television, autofiction has been derided as ‘navel-gazing’.<sup>88</sup> Using Bignell’s analysis of audiences for reality television, I argue that readers of autofiction are able to understand the competing claims of reality and fiction within the context of the same text. Both reality and fiction can co-exist within the same autofictional frame, and indeed autofictional audiences are able to reject the notion that each statement must be identified as one or the other. As audiences are accustomed to the appearance of both fiction and autobiographical elements within the same frame, the introduction of one or the other does not destroy the genre. In my own conception of autofiction, readers need not necessarily know which aspects of characters are fictional and which aspects refer to the referential sphere; they simply need to know that both exist in the same sphere. Whilst audiences are cynical about the truth claims of reality television, they do accept the presence of a continuum from reality to fiction. This suggests a greater level of awareness of genre coding and ability to process ‘je réel’ and ‘je fictif’ simultaneously than Schmitt proposes.

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<sup>87</sup> Jonathan Bignell, *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 149.

<sup>88</sup> Annie Richard, *L’autofiction et les femmes : Un chemin vers l’altruisme ?* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013), p. 26.



Finally, autofiction is theorised by Schmitt as a utopian state.<sup>89</sup> Schmitt's criticism of utopian autofiction is founded on the principle that if a text leans more towards fictional or to referential indices, the text would no longer fall under autofiction's genre status. Due to each reader's own conception of what constitutes the median of these two states, autofiction can thus not be said to be ruled by this conception. Yet Schmitt's objection does not take into account degrees of autofiction, or the ability of the reader to create more than a binary dualism. In my own conception, autofiction's specificity lies in its ability to create oscillation between indices of referentiality and fiction. Schmitt insists upon autofiction's non-hybrid status and he also claims to have found the solution to autofiction's generic problem through creating 'autonarration'. Schmitt's argument surrounding the authorial figure is potentially more useful for the purposes of this thesis. He argues that autofictional instability is caused through the locus of the authorial persona, and that the author is always re-imagined by the reader, creating an atmosphere of instability. According to Schmitt:

L'auteur se manifeste donc comme figure du fait de la distance et de l'opacité imposées par le texte. 'Figure' serait alors plus à comprendre ici dans le sens d'une silhouette qui se dessine plus ou moins clairement à l'horizon qu'un trope.<sup>90</sup>

In this way, it is important to conceive of the authorial presence as constructed by the reader, rather than as a fixed identity. As Schmitt concludes, '[l]'équation auctoriale par excellence, que doit résoudre le lecteur, se présente ainsi : l'auteur est à la fois *absent* et *présent* dans son texte'.<sup>91</sup> Parts of the authorial figure are thus seen by the reader, but readers may draw different conclusions about the same information. Therefore, the author can be said to be in some way reconstructed by each reader, displaying an authorial figure rather the same representation each time. Thus, the autofictional character is performed at each reading by the reader, creating more instability in the genre, yet also creating more stability through repetition and performance of the character. According to Schmitt, it is through this authorial figure that autofiction's instability is created. In his use of the authorial figure, Schmitt argues for a repudiation of the term 'autofiction,' due to his perception that autofiction depends on the ability to distinguish precisely between the referential and the fictional. Instead, Schmitt proposes 'autonarration' to describe texts more accurately within the genre, and to exclude older

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<sup>89</sup> Schmitt, *Je réel/je fictif*, p. 68.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

arguments about the constitution of fiction within autofiction. As I have argued, the inability to distinguish each sentence accurately as fiction or otherwise does not hamper autofiction's genre conception; it is actively creating it. Whilst I argue that autofiction's instability is partly created through its code-switching between the fictional and referential spheres, I agree with Schmitt's premise that the authorial figure also creates instability in the genre. Autofiction therefore, is predicated on the notion of doubt from the oscillation between the referential and fictional spheres, including the doubt experienced in the autofictional persona.

According to Forest, reality is understood by different authors in contradictory ways and therefore to talk of one reality as part of a definition of autofiction is contradictory.<sup>92</sup> Whilst reality is indeed theorised by authors in widely differing ways, conventional aspects of reality which are known as referential indices in this thesis, can be understood by the reader. Items such as places and names are acknowledged as making appeals to reality, and give the reader referential clues. Referentiality, or the ability to appeal to a reality, has been discussed in Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique*. Lejeune writes:

Tous les textes référentiels comportent donc ce que j'appellerai un 'pacte référentiel', implicite ou explicite, dans lequel sont inclus une définition du champ visé et un énoncé des modalités et du degré de ressemblance auxquels le texte prétend.<sup>93</sup>

In autofiction, this referentiality is also either implicit or explicit although it is more common to have an implicit pact. An explicit referentiality pact would only function in the event of '*autofiction*' being chosen for the subtitle on the front cover instead of the more usual '*roman*' being used. Of course, as there are many autofictional texts without classification through a subtitle on the front cover, the very choice of omission becomes a marker to those who are able to read such a marker. In this choice of reading, my understanding of autofiction functions more strongly when the reader is already aware of autofictional clues such as meta-commentary on the genre within the texts and paratextual information. In this way, it is similar to Lejeune's prerequisite for autobiographical writers to have published a text before his or her autobiography. Lejeune writes:

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<sup>92</sup> Forest, *Le roman, le réel*, p. 29.

<sup>93</sup> Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 36.

Peut-être n'est-on véritablement auteur qu'à partir d'un second livre, quand le nom propre inscrit en couverture devient le 'facteur commun' d'au moins deux textes différents et donne donc l'idée d'une personne qui n'est réductible à aucun de ses textes en particulier, et qui, susceptible d'en produire d'autres, les dépasse tous.<sup>94</sup>

Lejeune's definition therefore only takes authors who have been proven to have written before. Autofiction's attempt to recover those who are excluded by this definition is limited in its turn by the prior knowledge of its readers. This can be seen through the prism of Shen and Xu's investigation into the unreliability of autobiography and the problems it creates.<sup>95</sup> I shall use their work in greater detail in the first chapter to show the differences between the ways that autofictional texts can be read with or without privileged access to knowledge. Through this thesis I will also show how this access to privileged knowledge such as interviews, other texts from the authorial corpus or references from news articles and other media can create a different reading scheme for readers, further complicating the autofictional process. Paratextual information provided by authors can strengthen the case for texts to be gathered under an autofictional grouping yet can also be a source of difficulty within the genre. As Sheringham writes with regard to autobiography:

The genre's highly intertextual character also contributes to the hybrid quality of autobiographical texts. Explicit discourse concerning intentions and methodology in autobiography tends to be markedly intertextual since, explicitly or not, it implicates other practitioners and invokes the genre or canon as the author imagines it to exist before his or her contribution is made.<sup>96</sup>

Not only are the content of the texts themselves stretching in intertextual ways, but the canon and other practitioners are implicated in paratextual ways. Autofiction's use of the paratext is therefore critical and needs attention within this thesis to fully extrapolate the implications of the paratext upon the genre.

My own definition for autofiction, which shall be used throughout this thesis, relies upon an interpretation of Doubrovsky's definition, whilst also taking into account Schmitt's evaluation of 'je réel' and 'je fictif'. In my understanding of autofiction, the autofictional persona is key to becoming the focus of interrogation within this thesis.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>95</sup> Dan Shen and Dejin Xu, 'Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality: Unreliability in Autobiography versus Fiction', *Poetics Today*, 28 (2007), pp. 43–87.

<sup>96</sup> Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires*, p. 15.

This thesis discusses ways in which the autofictional persona is located within the texts, as well as how this autofictional persona is connected within the referential sphere. Yet how is the autofictional persona constructed? And how is this persona performed within an autofictional context? Furthermore, once the autofictional persona is constructed, is there an autofictional body at the centre of the text? And if so, what conclusions can be drawn from the bodies of contemporary autofictional writers?

Autofiction therefore depends upon the creation of doubt in a text as to whether to categorise the text as autobiography or fiction, coupled with the insertion of a narrator, character and author who are overtly linked together. These roles within the text are not necessarily linked by the use of the same name, but must have a remarkable affinity with one another. This creation of doubt can be understood through the prism of Judith Butler's definition of performativity where performativity reads for a sustained series of acts, a repetition.<sup>97</sup> As each autofictional act is produced through speech acts or through written declarations, the repetition is crucial and adds to the sense of doubt that the reader experiences. As the autofictional persona is reinforced, repetition will create a sense of familiarity and certainty. At the same time, as the autofictional persona is reinforced, fictional narrative and fictional indices are used to create a jarring sense within the text. Both fictional and referential indices, repeatedly performed with the same text, are necessary to create autofiction. Without the repetition, autofiction's ability to tread the line between autobiography and fiction is not only severely compromised, it must fail. Autofiction therefore must be performed through oscillation between fictional and referential clues that contribute to an overall text. I will therefore posit that autofiction can be seen entirely through the lens of performance, as understood in a Butlerian sense, with the help of the repetition of speech acts and actions by an autofictional character. This performance is heavily dependent on the ability of the text to perform the autofictional persona. I will also argue that due to the autobiographical construct, the body is implicated in this performance. As the autofictional persona is predicated on the notion of an author, I will analyse representations of the persona through language and speech acts as well as representations of the body. Throughout this thesis, I will examine not only representations of the author's body, but of other characters that are mentioned within the text in an attempt to see how bodily personae function within autofiction.

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<sup>97</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 4th edn (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. xv.

Autofiction's diverse forms of definition indicate a need for clear definition within this thesis. As Philippe Vilain, autofictional theorist and author, writes that autofiction has become over-theorised<sup>98</sup> yet there is still a need for discrete factors to be identified in order to analyse autofictional texts. Without definition, autofictional texts cannot be truly analysed and categorised. In my view, two discrete factors have been overlooked in contemporary autofictional theory: the influence of the ludic, as well as the performative aspects of the autofictional persona. I will now move on to discuss how autofiction is shaped by the ludic before going on to discuss the place of the autofictional persona's body in an attempt to understand the complexities of the referential sphere within the genre.

## **Ludic potentiality of autofiction**

As Todorov, amongst others, has remarked, genres require discrete capabilities in order to realise their potential as genres.<sup>99</sup> Without these discrete paths, genres cannot come to exist. In autofiction's case, I will suggest that part of autofiction's unique genre capabilities lies in its ludic potentiality. At first glance, the ludic and autofiction may appear to be at differing ends of a spectrum with the ludic disassociated from what can be seen as both a dangerous<sup>100</sup> and serious genre. Yet, I will argue that the ludic is in fact indispensable in autofiction's development and function. Once seen as opposing reality, the ludic is, intimately involved in real life.

Johann Huizinga, one of the most important theorists of game in the twentieth century, gave his presentation of his theory in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, published in 1936. One of his main propositions in this text is that culture arises from play<sup>101</sup> creating a significant debt. Huizinga's conceptions are underpinned by a reading of play which is that:

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely

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<sup>98</sup> Philippe Vilain, 'Démon de la définition' in *Autofiction(s) : Colloque de Cerisy*, 2008, pp. 461–482 (p. 463).

<sup>99</sup> Todorov, 'L'origine des genres', pp. 34–35.

<sup>100</sup> Shirley Ann Jordan 'État Présent: Autofiction in the Feminine' *French Studies*, 67 (2013), pp. 76–84, (p. 77).

<sup>101</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 45.

binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'.<sup>102</sup>

Huizinga's formulation sets reality and play at odds, with play excluded from real life which sets up a problematic relation in his text. As Motte remarks, 'he postulates play as absolutely central to the human experience, yet on the other hand, he suggests that it is marginal thereto.'<sup>103</sup> This dichotomy will be carried by other theorists, including those using Huizinga as a foundational text such as Roger Caillois.

Roger Caillois, theorist of game and theologian, is also concerned with the separation of life and play, although his focus is on the sensations produced by play and games rather than a categorisation of types of games.<sup>104</sup> Both Caillois and Huizinga place emphasis on play and by extension, games, as separate from ordinary life and reality. Yet in Winnicott's seminal text, *Playing and Reality*, this separation is debunked. He writes that, 'the essential feature of my communication is this, that playing is an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living.'<sup>105</sup> In Winnicott's conception of play, therefore, play is inextricable from reality, rendering the previous separation null and void. Indeed, Winnicott's intervention marks play as creative experience, linking it directly to basic functions.

According to Bruss, games imply equality between the participants. Reader and author are therefore in some sense equal, and are both subordinated to the game. Bruss writes:

A game requires that the symbolic labor of a literary work be explicitly and evenly divided. Where other audiences are limited to retaining and integrating what has been imparted to them, the player-reader is free to challenge, overturn, reorganize what he is told. The situation is no longer one in which an author putatively informs or manipulates his audience, who look to him for improvement or titillation beyond their own poor powers to create.<sup>106</sup>

Whilst both author and reader are subjugated to the game, the labour of the two participants cannot be considered equal. The author-player created the game, and in so doing, has therefore an inestimable advantage as well as the power to manipulate his or

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>103</sup> Warren Motte, 'Playing in Earnest' *New Literary History* 40:1, (2009) pp. 25–42, (p. 26).

<sup>104</sup> Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes : le masque et le vertige*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992)

<sup>105</sup> Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 50.

<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Bruss, 'The Game of Literature and Some Literary Games', *New Literary History* 9 (1977) pp. 153–72 (p. 158).

her audience. Whilst the player-reader does have the power to subvert the game, ultimately the power still resides with the player-author through their ability to control all possible outcomes which have been tailored by the player-author. Without the invention of the author-reader, the player-reader cannot participate, leaving the dominant power with the player-author. Whilst both player-author and player-reader are therefore subjugated to the game they are currently playing, their subjugation and outcomes are not equal. Further, as Bruss points out, “literary games exhibit their discontinuities and unstabilize the vantage points on which realistic perspective depends.”<sup>107</sup> This is particularly important in the understanding of literary games as this instability, whilst part of the creative experience that Winnicott describes, creates oscillations between referential and fictional spheres.

In a landmark edition of *Yale French Studies*, Ehrmann echoes Winnicott’s assertions and writes, ‘All reality is caught up in the play of the concepts which designate it. Reality is thus not capable of being objectified, nor subjectified.’<sup>108</sup> Ehrmann’s dissection of both Caillois and Huizinga further dissolves the artificial boundary established between reality and play. As Wilson writes, ‘Play is seen to be at once fundamental to human activity and absolutely metamorphic; game, at once atomistic and total, voluntary but inevitable.’<sup>109</sup> In fact, Wilson creates eight categories to designate types of games from educative games that provide a social and cultural function to Derrida’s games of deconstruction. Second in Wilson’s list is the conception that play is, ‘the vehicle of human expression and the foundation of all aesthetics.’<sup>110</sup> Psychoanalysis, role playing games, atomistic analysis and mathematical game theory also make up the categories that Wilson has assigned to play and games, but his analysis of literary games as reflexive and self-contained<sup>111</sup> is perhaps the most useful here. Under Wilson’s conception, literary games follow rules within the bounds of the text, creating texts such as those of the Oulipo and Queneau. These rules are perhaps the most important in an understanding of autofiction given the lack of rules within the current autofictional canon. Yet it is precisely a measure of autofiction that texts are

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>108</sup> Jacques Ehrmann, Cathy Lewis and Phil Lewis, ‘Homo Ludens Revisited’ in *Yale French Studies* 41, 1968, pp. 31–57 (p. 56).

<sup>109</sup> Rawdon Wilson, *In Palamedes Shadow: Explorations in Play, Game, and Narrative Theory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), p. 23.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

establishing autofictional boundaries through breaking boundaries of autobiography and fiction.

According to Gascoigne, all narrative fiction writing can be characterized as ludic to the extent that 'it is inviting an interplay between text and reader'.<sup>112</sup> This interplay can be seen as any situation in which the reader is invited to combine with the author to create the text. Yet it is not only fictional writing that can be seen as ludic. As can be seen in autofictional writing, and even to some extent, autobiographical writing can have both ludic uses as well as ludic implications. Ludic writing itself, not necessarily fictional or otherwise, needs to be more narrowly defined than this first suggests.

Following from Gascoigne and Passmore, I will use game to mean a subset of playing in which the game is 'marked by regularity and by the reliability of rules; it is not subject to whim. Play, in contrast, aspires to be untrammelled by rules, free-wheeling, improvisational'.<sup>113</sup> Of course, a game can only function if there are rules, caveats and an understanding of the limits. Without this understanding, and without an explicit framework within which a game can be understood, the reader or participant is just 'playing'.<sup>114</sup> Yet how do these rules become explicit in autofictional texts? Furthermore, what type of games do autofictional authors use, and what ludic properties do autofictional texts possess? According to Gascoigne,

With its emphasis on experiment and artifice, the ludic text can probe the relationship in imaginative writing between, on the one hand, adherence to extra-textual systems of order which inescapably transcend and shape any particular act of writing, and, on the other hand, the search and capacity for individual utterance, original formulation, precise expression of the self's lived experience.<sup>115</sup>

In Gascoigne's conception of ludic texts, play as well as games are evoked and used in the construction of texts. Gascoigne's 'extra-textual systems of order' are particularly relevant in autofiction where the reader is constantly using extra-textual frames of reference in order to both commit to the relationship between autofiction and the reader, as well as accessing the referential sphere. Whilst using frames of reference such as places, names and objects anchored in the referential sphere, autofictional writers use

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<sup>112</sup> David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>113</sup> Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction*, p. 23.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.



texts as games to play with the limits of autofiction. Texts can be seen as grounds for understanding the self, and pushing the boundaries of possibility for the autofictional persona. Autofictional texts themselves are inherently constructed on the basis of experiment due to the innovative nature of the genre. Gascoigne's text focuses on Perec, as well as the Oulipo, in order to trace the form of the ludic text, yet it is useful to trace the ludic text within autofiction as the two entities appear to be closely interlinked. Indeed, my own definition for autofiction includes a caveat that autofictional personae (the conjunction of narrator, main character and author) play with the boundaries of possibility. Autofiction inhabits a zone between autobiography and fiction, using aspects from both in order to create a new genre, and in so doing, creates ludic space in order to do so. Autofiction exists in negation; denying the text its autobiographical and fictional status. In this in-between zone, autofiction's ability to use strategies from both autobiography and fiction create a ludic space to access aspects from both.

This is particularly evident in the texts of Chloé Delaume, discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, although ludic spaces and games can be seen throughout the autofictional texts used in this thesis in varying guises. As autofictional writers experiment further with the Internet, and with genre construction through paratextual material, ludic spaces within autofiction become ever greater. This can certainly be seen with Eric Chevillard, and his *L'autofictif* project discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis. Within each autofictional author studied in this thesis, each author uses autofiction to push the boundaries of previous genres, as well as implicit and explicit differentiations from other autofictional authors. In each instance, autofictional games have rules that are explicitly enunciated, or genres that are explicitly transgressed. This is perhaps easiest to see in the case of Delaume as her texts have used other games such as Cleudo, the Sims and a role-playing game as models for her texts. In using games, autofictional authors are able to create new realities within the sphere of the autofictional persona. Explicitly using games within texts simply makes visible the pattern of play that was imbedded in the author, reader relationship before, adding a different layer of game to the text.

In each author's texts, games call forth different creative strategies in order to use the autofictional persona and interact with the reader. The autofictional persona is the key for the autofiction's function and referential constructs. Without the reader, autofiction's ability to create games is severely limited. The games only function in the presence and participation of the reader, giving rise to major difficulties in the genre. If the reader does not cooperate, autofiction's status becomes more confused and limited in

scope. This is particularly true in interactive games such as reader-determined texts but is equally true of texts that play with the boundaries of autobiography. In each instance, autofiction's status can be corrupted.

In all of the autofictional authors and texts studied in this thesis, play with language and form is perhaps the most prevalent and noticeable. Games can also create the illusion that the reader is in control of the text, subverting authorial control. Of course, the author is always in control, which is particularly important with the autofictional text. Although the reader can access the autofictional persona, the author will remain in control of the autofictional persona and by extension the text. Although the game can appear to wrestle constraints upon the autofictional persona, in fact, the constraints paradoxically free the author and give the ultimate control back. The reader is simply reminded of their lack of control and a concomitant control by the author. 'Reading can be viewed as a negotiation of meaning between reader and text' and, as Gascoigne further remarks, 'a kind of chess-game.'<sup>116</sup> This is true not only of the ludic text, but also of the autofictional text as the reader struggles to negotiate the boundaries of the genre, the autofictional persona as well as any game the author may be introducing.

Autofictional personae, central to my understanding in autofiction, are critical to the performance of autofictional texts. They are, however, also critical in understanding how autofictional authors play with the reader and within the text. In order to analyse this function of autofiction, I will now study autofictional personae as the facilitators and lynch-pins of the text.

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<sup>116</sup> Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction*, p. 16.

## Performative autofiction

From its conception, autofiction has been understood as a space of non-conformity; a reaction against two dominant forms of literature, that of autobiography and of fiction. In literary theory, particularly in Lejeune's intervention in autobiographical theory, these two dominant forms have been constructed as independent monoliths.

Autofiction's place has been defined as one of opposition and negation, and one which Jordan describes as, 'its familiar, productive discomforts'.<sup>117</sup> After the Barthesian death of the author, critical theory of fiction has largely ignored the author, yet in discussions of autobiography the author has remained central to our understanding of the function of autobiography. Without the author, or authorial persona, there is no autobiography, and this remains true within discussions of autofiction. Women's writing has also been associated with autofiction, yet does this construction persist within the texts themselves, or is this simply a mediated construction of a genre that creates something quite different? In either case, discussions of the body, whether authorial or otherwise, become central to our understanding of what authorial presence might mean within a text.

Studies in autobiography have used Butler's definition for performativity before, yet it has not been used in studies of autofiction. Butler's definition of performativity 'sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body'.<sup>118</sup> Sidonie Smith has used performativity in autobiography to argue for an understanding of interiority of the self. She writes that, '[a]utobiographical storytelling becomes one means through which people in the West believe themselves to be "selves." In this way, autobiographical storytelling is always a performative occasion'.<sup>119</sup> How then does the autobiographical character access the referential sphere? Where does that leave representations of the character within texts? What is meant by performance in this context?

According to Bordo, 'we learn how to "fabricate" [performances of identity] in the same way we learn how to manipulate a language: through imitation and gradual

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<sup>117</sup> Jordan, 'Autofiction, Ethics and Consent', p. 5.

<sup>118</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xv.

<sup>119</sup> Sidonie Smith, 'Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance' in *Women, Theory, Autobiography: A Reader*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp. 108–115 (p. 109).

command of public, cultural idioms'.<sup>120</sup> I suggest that in the same way as performances of identity are constructed, the language of autofiction is constructed. Performance of autofiction takes place through signifiers of referentiality and through signifiers of fiction. Each signifier in itself does not produce autofiction; rather an accumulation of such creates autofiction. One of the main ways that autofiction produces performances of referentiality is indeed through the performance of identity. As the genre is predicated on the notion that the author, main character and narrator are linked in some way, each performance of that link creates autofictional bonds. Yet how are these bonds created in autofiction? In the performance of autofictional identity, how are bodies reconstructed in the text? Are they effaced as in many accounts of autobiography? How are autofictional performances to be understood?

Using Butler's definition for performativity, I will seek to show that the performance of an autofiction is a sustained series of acts that constitute a persona, which is in turn performed and embodied by the very text that it represents. With each repetition of the autofictional persona, the autofiction becomes stronger and this effect is magnified by the production of a number of projects undertaken by the author. As each text is added to an autofictional author's production, the autofictional persona is strengthened and performed by each text. Butler insists upon the repetition of acts, writing:

Performativity cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularised and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for this subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualised production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production.<sup>121</sup>

Whilst the threats that are present in gender performativity are not present in the same way as in autofiction, it is important to note that without the sustained process of referential and fictional information within the text, autofiction fails. The performance of autofiction through the authorial construct is therefore vital to its success. Part of this success is then given to the creation of the body of the text, the very body of the

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<sup>120</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), p. 289.

<sup>121</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 60.

autofictional persona. Given that there are fictional inconsistencies contained within the autofictional persona, the body no longer belongs to the autobiographical character. Instead, this body is created within the confines of the text. This is most easily demonstrated within the form of Chloé Delaume and in Chapter 3 of this thesis, wherein the autofictional character is a pseudonym with different facets and names within one identity. The autofictional character then becomes the text, creating the literal embodiment of autofiction.

Butler's stance on the body as a public phenomenon reveals that the body is 'constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.'<sup>122</sup> In the case of autofiction, how is the body constituted at all? If, as I argue, the body is constituted through performance of the autofictional persona, how is this achieved? Furthermore, in the case of Chloé Delaume particularly, if part of this relationship is fictionalised, how then is the body to be understood? And where can it be placed in relation to the understanding of the genre?

Autofictional performance and the problem of the body further give way to questions surrounding the gender of the constituted autofictional body. If the body is the scaffolding on which the constructed identity of the character is placed,<sup>123</sup> what constitutes the scaffold? In autofiction, is there a difference between the way that female and male authors approach the body?

Of those who have written on autofiction, Ouellette-Michalska is one of the few theorists to approach the body – via a focus on female writers. She writes that two aspects of autofiction become immediately apparent as soon as autofiction is examined: the abundance of women writers, and the place of the body.<sup>124</sup> Ouellette-Michalska then focuses on class markers within literature to suggest that women who are able to write are those who belong to a privileged minority or with exceptional talent.<sup>125</sup> Discussing the current production of autofiction, she writes, '[n]ous sommes aux limites de la *trash* littérature, quelque part entre érotisme, mutilation et pornographie'.<sup>126</sup> The problem with Ouellette-Michalska's analysis of current autofictional trends is that it does not delve into the ways in which women access their bodies. Instead, she creates a paradox by stating that, '[l]'exclusion des visages est la condition première de la

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<sup>122</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London; New York, Routledge, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>123</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>124</sup> Ouellette-Michalska, p. 80.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

pornographie'.<sup>127</sup> Yet she has also named the writers of autofiction, creating a situation in which, according to her own criterion, the authors cannot create pornography; their faces are named. Whilst Ouellette-Michalska's analysis of female writers of autofiction represents a start in studies of the body and autofiction, it does not go far enough. Jordan's recent intervention in autofiction is particularly timely with its overview of the abundance of women in the genre.<sup>128</sup> Yet many interventions in the theory of autofictional writers who are women focus on their presence, rather than on the performance of the texts themselves. Instead, I suggest that in-depth analyses of texts must be carried out in order to see the state of contemporary autofiction in both male and female writers.

Much critical theory has been published on Hélène Cixous and her exhortation to women writers to produce 'écriture féminine', and to inscribe their bodies into the text. Of course, much debate rests on whether Cixous is perpetrating biological essentialism.<sup>129</sup> Yet do contemporary writers, 'write their bodies', or have they bypassed this discourse entirely? In fact, Camille Laurens, autofictional writer, explicitly invokes Cixous and her discourse of the body by stating that, '[i]l faut évidemment relativiser, et considérer qu'il s'agit moins ici d'une sexuation de l'écriture (écriture féminine et écriture masculine) que d'un genre, d'une essence. En ce sens, tous les écrivains d'autofiction seraient féminins, même les hommes'.<sup>130</sup> Writing with the body, then, according to Laurens turns into a 'feminine' act. Does this dualism function in autofictional texts as part of a larger trend to use autofiction as an innovative genre in which feminine voices can create a different form of literature? Serge Doubrovsky indirectly references this when discussing his own autofictional texts. He writes that, '[e]ncore une fois, aucune autobiographie ni aucune autofiction ne peut être la photographie, la reproduction d'une vie. Ce n'est pas possible. La vie se vit dans le corps ; l'autre, c'est un texte.'<sup>131</sup> Doubrovsky's separation of the body from the text, and by extension from a construction of the self, reveals an unstable identity, formed without a body. As Bordo writes, '[b]ut what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom...) and as

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>128</sup> Jordan, 'État Présent: Autofiction in the Feminine', p. 77.

<sup>129</sup> Abigail Bray, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>130</sup> Camille Laurens, 'Qui dit ça ?' in *Autofiction(s) : Colloque de Cerisy, 2008*, pp. 25–35 (p. 28).

<sup>131</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, 'Les points sur les "I"', in *Genèse et autofiction*, pp. 53–68 (p. 63).

undermining the best efforts of that self".<sup>132</sup> Bordo's statement reveals an underlying dualism with the self as opposed to the body. Thus, how is the self in autofiction performed? Is it simply performed through language, with the body entirely effaced? Neuman argues that the body is simply effaced in many autobiographies.<sup>133</sup> She continues by stating, '[t]hat western cultures assume an analogy between mind, masculinity, and culture, and between body, femininity, and "nature," only reinforces the disembodiment of the self which is characteristic of most autobiographies'.<sup>134</sup> Her analysis of autobiographies puts the body in opposition to life-writing, creating a dichotomy. As the self is partly composed and influenced by the body, a strange juxtaposition occurs. Yet does this same juxtaposition occur in autofiction?

Throughout this thesis, Butlerian performativity is used to understand autofiction as a performative genre. Firstly, autofictional identity is composed of the autofictional persona – the unbreakable relation between author, narrator and main character. The autofictional persona can be used to perform both fictional and referential speech acts in order to oscillate between the two modes. Furthermore, the autofictional persona rarely involves use of the body in autofictional texts, leading to the premise that autofictional personae are using the texts themselves as a replacement for the body taking performativity to an extreme. Each text, performance and paratextual intervention combine to create the physical manifestation of the body, further reinforcing the duality of body and persona posited earlier. As each performance of the persona accumulates, autofiction's presence becomes ever-more stable. Conversely, this entails an understanding of autofiction in which a lone text or intervention is less stable and prone to switching genre. Coding of autofiction therefore requires a significant investment in the persona before the autofictional status of a text or intervention can be measured. In this way, autofiction can be seen as existing in a continuum rather than as a stable state that can be achieved; an autofictional persona can be more or less adaptable. As will be seen in the case of Chloé Delaume, this representation of the autofictional persona can supplant the original persona, creating a new identity. Ireland, in her article describing the status of othering in contemporary

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<sup>132</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> Shirley Neuman, 'Autobiography, Bodies, Manhood' in *Women, Theory, Autobiography: A Reader* pp. 415–428 (p. 415).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

women's writing, discusses the 'notion of writing a new script on the sister's body'.<sup>135</sup> I will suggest that one of autofiction's defining characteristics in the authors studied in this thesis is the ability of the autofictional persona to create a new script of the body in and of the text. The duality of body and persona is both upheld and destroyed at the same time. Referential and fictional utterances combine to create a persona that uses the physicality of the text as a body creating the duality, yet through the lack of a physical body described in texts also destroys this duality. As Gaensbauer notes, the perspective of the reader is inherent in this understanding of autofiction<sup>136</sup> and also relies on the reader to use autofictional kinship to access a greater knowledge of the autofictional identity.

Both male and female writers are essential to the understanding of contemporary autofiction, and so I will examine texts from both sexes. In studies of masculinity, Connell writes that, '[i]n the semiotic opposition of masculinity and femininity, masculinity is the unmarked term, the place of symbolic authority'.<sup>137</sup> Despite the perceived paucity of male writers in contemporary autofiction, many earlier male writers have been subsumed under the category of autofiction, including Proust and Sartre. In the context of contemporary autofiction, how then do male autofictional writers assume, or challenge, their masculinity? Do they inscribe their bodies into the text and do they differ from female representation of the body in texts?

Representations of bodies in an autofictional context may invoke references from an extra-textual reality in order to create more references to a referential sphere. In this way, paratextual information can be critical to the performance of autofiction.

Genette's first conception of paratext in *Seuils* described the nature of the information that can contribute to a text but which is not inside the text itself.<sup>138</sup> From the beginning, paratextual information has been critical to an understanding of autofiction. As Genette describes, the term peritext is used to label information that is within the covers of the text, as opposed to the epitext which designates all information relating to the text that is outside of the text. Both the epitext and the peritext are vital within autofictional texts. Peritextual information is essential to autofiction due to the necessity of creating links between the author, narrator and main character in order to

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<sup>135</sup> Susan Ireland, 'Deviant Bodies: Corporeal Otherness in Contemporary Women's Writing' in *Nottingham French Studies*, 45:3, 2006, pp. 39–51 (p. 41).

<sup>136</sup> Gaensbauer, "'Autofiction + x = ?'" Chloé Delaume's Experimental Self-Representations', p. 219.

<sup>137</sup> R.W. Connell, 'The Social Organisation of Masculinity' in *The Masculinities Reader* ed. by Stephen Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp. 30–50 (p. 33).

<sup>138</sup> Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, 2nd edn (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 7–8.



forge the autobiographical persona. Without epitextual information, it can be difficult for the author to create either the referents needed for an autobiographical character or the doubt implied in a fictional narrative. The information recorded on the text itself can be important, but how does this translate in a text that is published on the Internet? Through an examination of their texts, Chloé Delaume and Éric Chevillard provide interesting answers to this question in this thesis, demonstrating new methods of autofictional conception and reader engagement in the digital age. Of course, in the digital age, it is difficult for writers to produce texts that have no preconceived notions attached to them through the authorial name, or brand association common in bookshops.

As Derrida suggests, the law of genre creates a situation in which transgression of the law needs to be seen. One of the conditions of Doubrovskian autofiction is created through the subtitle '*roman*' on the front cover so as to create the impression of a fictional narrative.<sup>139</sup> This subtitle is also important for Philippe Vilain,<sup>140</sup> yet now that autofiction has become a recognisable brand thanks in part to the mediatization of the word, does this subtitle have anything left to add to classification? Fictional markers other than those created by this subtitle, such as the information on the back cover, appear to add differences to the classification. One of the main points of contention in autofiction is that the tension between autobiography and fiction must remain in each text, or the text fails as an example of autofiction. In order for autofiction to function, the autofictional persona must be created and give referential signifiers to the reader. Further, these referential signifiers should be cast into doubt by the use of fictional narrative strategies, one of which could be the subtitle '*roman*'. As Gasparini points out, the subtitle '*roman*' can also be a way of avoiding prosecution under privacy or libel laws. He writes, '[l]'allégation de fictionnalité protège aussi l'auteur contre d'éventuelles récriminations de qui se jugerait diffamé sous les traits d'un personnage. Le sous-titre remplit alors une fonction juridique et remplace l'avertissement éditorial'.<sup>141</sup> Fictional readings of autofictional texts also become more likely thanks to strong uses of paratextual information to deal with autobiographical texts. Owing to the number of conditions that autobiography imposes, taken from

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<sup>139</sup> Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 209.

<sup>140</sup> Isabelle Grell, and Philippe Vilain, 'Entretien inédit de Philippe Vilain par Isabelle Grell', 31 August 2009, <<http://autofiction.org/index.php?post/2009/08/31/Entretien-inedit-d-Isabelle-Grell-avec-Philippe-Vilain>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>141</sup> Gasparini, *Est-il je ?*, p. 70.

Lejeune, those texts that do not display the characteristics of autobiography are usually taken to be fiction. Thus, if the text is unmarked as autobiography, a fictional reading can be taken. The autobiographical persona begins the process of doubt in autofiction, but in order for autofictional texts to contest fictional readings of their text appropriately, referential indices are essential to the genre's construction. Referential markers within the text need to be used, which can be from other writers or from places that are recognisable to readers.

Of course, it is indeed possible within autofictional texts to create an environment in which the text can create this delicate balancing act between referential signifiers and appeals to fictionality, yet this autofictional reading can be enhanced through more paratextual information. As Gasparini writes, '[p]oser le problème de la fictionnalité du roman, c'est déjà en suggérer une lecture référentielle'.<sup>142</sup> The delicate position of fiction, therefore, is put immediately under threat. Some autofictional critics have argued that autofiction, 'foregrounds the fraught issue of the relation between writer and text and implicitly invites questions about the subject position of the writer in relation to the author.'<sup>143</sup> Whilst the autofictional persona should be explicitly related to the author, I argue that the relationship between writer and text, although fraught, deserves more attention. This relationship can perhaps illuminate the very dynamic that autofiction uses in order to function. It is important for the reader to create an indelible kinship link between different autofictional texts of the same author for the autofictional identity to flourish.

Yet the autofictional persona does not exist in a vacuum. Other characters within the autofictional œuvre studied here will be examined to provide a counterpoint to the autofictional persona. These other characters can demonstrate the ways in which the body of the authorial construct can be analysed and defined. Other characters within the texts can also provide further referential tags. As will be seen later in this thesis in the case of Philippe Vilain, Annie Ernaux's texts are used to create an insoluble link between the two writers, giving Vilain's texts more indices of referentiality. Furthermore, given the links between autofictional authors, and the frequency with which they use one another's texts, intertextual references are an unavoidable part of autofiction. Intertextual references inherently create a less stable narrative, one that helps to create a non-linear structure within the text as each reference creates more links

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<sup>142</sup> Gasparini, *Est-il je ?*, p. 88.

<sup>143</sup> Robson, 'The female vampire: Chantal Chawaf's melancholic *autofiction*', p. 61.

within different forms of media. Intertextuality has become a wide-ranging term, which, ‘continually refers to the impossibility of singularity, unity and thus of unquestionable authority’,<sup>144</sup> further giving rise to a multiplicity of meanings. Paradoxically, intertextuality can be seen as a function of the simulacrum,<sup>145</sup> as it copies the original and replaces it in a different context giving rise to an essential paradox in autofiction. If access to reality or indices of referentiality is given through intertextual references, they can also be effaced through the simulacrum. Intertextual references therefore create a further instability within the genre of autofiction. Whereas Hughes suggests an act of filiation from *Chaos* to *Le livre brisé*,<sup>146</sup> I suggest that intertextual references play a more complex role in autofiction, which is developed in each chapter.

I will now introduce the authors contained in this thesis to provide an understanding of their theoretical standpoint before analysing each author individually. The following chapters will attempt to answer questions raised here in order to study autofictional performance in the texts of four contemporary authors.

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<sup>144</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 209.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>146</sup> Hughes, ‘Recycling and Repetition in Recent French *Autofiction*’, p. 571.

## Autofictional corpus

All authors chosen for inclusion in this thesis are based in the metropolitan French literary scene, and are of the same generation. Of all four authors included in this study, Chloe Delaume is the youngest while Catherine Cusset is the oldest by ten years. As part of her œuvre, Cusset has been peripherally involved in contributing to autofictional theory through the publication of one essay entitled, 'L'écriture de soi : Un projet moraliste',<sup>147</sup> but she has not appeared to be overly concerned with the theorisation of autofiction in the same way as other writers in this thesis have done.<sup>148</sup> Cusset's controversial text, *Jouir*, entered her female specificity into her texts as it discussed a woman's sexual life and it was narrated by a first-person narrator. Her texts, some of which can be ascribed the label of autofiction, construct an autofictional figure through her body, creating an interesting space to discuss themes of motherhood and femininity. Within this context, Catherine Cusset's inclusion in this thesis is to some extent part of this movement due to her most controversial text, *Jouir*. *Jouir* can be seen as a precursor to the autofictional movement in the twenty-first century, and raises questions on the ability of women to write explicit texts as well as the problems of using other characters within her texts.

Autofiction has been described as a 'genre masturbatoire',<sup>149</sup> and one of the key trends within autofiction is to discuss relationships and intimate lives.<sup>150</sup> Cusset's conception of autofiction relates to her internal experience. She has written:

Ma conception de l'autofiction est celle de Doubrovsky, pour qui l'autofiction n'est 'fiction' que parce qu'elle est écriture, aventure du point de vue du langage. Rien n'y est inventé, le but étant au contraire de cerner au plus près le réel – pas la réalité, mais le réel, qui est d'un autre ordre, qui relève de l'expérience intérieure.<sup>151</sup>

Cusset's distinction between reality and the real, which she takes to mean internal experiences, produces texts that are more fragmented and some less clearly autofictional in their stance. Her inclusion in this corpus thus allows for more discussion at the edges of autofiction to see the differences between her texts and fiction whilst using

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<sup>147</sup> Catherine Cusset, 'L'écriture de soi : Un projet moraliste' in *Genèse et autofiction*, pp.197–210.

<sup>148</sup> Delaume and Vilain have both published full length theoretical texts on autofiction.

<sup>149</sup> Burgelin, 'Pour l'autofiction' in *Autofiction(s)*, p. 6.

<sup>150</sup> Stephanie Michineau, 'Autofiction : Entre transgression et innovation', 17 July 2010, <<http://www.autofiction.org/index.php?post/2010/07/17/Stephanie-Michineau>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>151</sup> Catherine Cusset, 'Je' in *Autofiction(s) : Colloque de Cerisy 2008*, pp. 35–42 (pp. 35–36).

autofictional modes of reading to elucidate the digressions. Cusset's autofictional persona is expressed through her first-person narrator, and the main character interjects with referential details to produce autofiction. Cusset's fictional and autofictional œuvre are tied together through a discussion of her personal relationships, both familial and sexual, marking her female specificity and showing the bounds of motherhood, frequently drawing on her own experiences to create texts playing with the boundaries of fiction and autofiction. Whilst many of her texts use fragmentation to introduce another set of memories, or to introduce a different episode of the main character's life, they are all usually linked together and produce the typical structure of a novel.

Catherine Cusset's autofictional texts have been chosen with reference to the paratextual information available from the author in the form of interviews, but also through critical examination of the texts themselves. Cusset's corpus gives indications of autofiction through both her autofictional persona as well as her use of referential indicators such as easily identifiable information. Cusset's most recent text incorporates photography into the narrative, giving a wider sense of ludic autofictional trends. Lastly, language structures within Cusset's texts provide an introduction to the playful ways that autofictional authors play with language and structures. In particular, Cusset's use of the alphabet to designate her sexual partners in *Jouir* will be analysed in greater detail to provide a ludic framework.

Philippe Vilain's unusual situation, being an autofictional producer, a character in works that are not his own, and a theoretician of autofiction will give an opportunity to discuss the specific differences between his theoretical production as well as between autofictional texts. Philippe Vilain's presence in this thesis is also due to his strength as an autofictional theorist. His definition for autofiction demonstrates a strong echo of Doubrovskian autofiction and reveals his autofictional project to play with the limits of autofiction. He writes:

La veine autofictionnelle me permettait, dans un geste émancipateur, de réécrire l'histoire, de donner une version romancée, plus ou moins fantasmée, de la relation – cela en jouant sur une ambiguïté romanesque : en effet, je savais très bien que, même en ne racontant pas exactement la vérité, les lecteurs auraient la naïveté de croire que tous ces événements m'étaient réellement arrivés, puisque j'évoquais une personne réelle.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 58.

Vilain's definition also exposes his autofictional persona as a construct rather than as an autobiographical figure. Through this autofictional figure, Vilain's corpus is analysed as a whole with individual texts as facets of his identity.

Although Philippe Vilain is present online, through interviews and excerpts from a film based on one of his texts,<sup>153</sup> he does not use the Internet in the same way as Delaume and Chevillard, creating an interesting juxtaposition of the hypertext used by the other two authors. Their use of the Internet in their texts links them, but also destroys any notion of linearity in a way that Cusset and Vilain do not attempt. Vilain's texts, however, follow a more conventional autofictional path with the narrator, main character and author approached as one identity. During this second chapter, the creation of an intertextual dialogue between two œuvres will be discussed between Annie Ernaux and Philippe Vilain as well as the creation of traditional stereotypes of women in Vilain's œuvre. This intertextual linking between two different œuvres helps to create a different type of ludic framework that was seen in the case of Catherine Cusset and also serves to create a counter point to his treatment of female characters within his œuvre. Whilst Vilain's autofictional persona is well-developed, his female characters lack depth and appear to be two-dimensional objects. In each text, examples have been taken to demonstrate this lack, and to demonstrate the disparity between the treatment of his characters.

Chloé Delaume's use of autofiction has created a strong performance out of autofiction, reshaping the ways in which the genre can be used. According to her own statements surrounding autofiction, she writes that she will, '[f]aire acte d'autofiction'.<sup>154</sup> As Richard expresses, Chloé Delaume has engaged her soul and body through autofiction.<sup>155</sup> Her performance of autofiction raises questions about the extent to which autofiction can truly play with language without descending into non-meaning. Her texts are the most stylistically complicated in this thesis and reveal an intriguing mix of theory and autofictional practice which is replicated in her online presence through her website and social media accounts. Current scholarship on Chloé Delaume's texts is fairly limited, yet rapidly expanding. Jordan uses Delaume as an

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<sup>153</sup> For example: Linda Belhaoues, "'Pas son genre'", Le nouveau film de Lucas Belvaux en tournage à Arras', *Culturebox*, 1 April 2013, <<http://culturebox.francetvinfo.fr/pas-son-genre-le-nouveau-film-de-lucas-belvaux-en-tournage-a-arras-134287>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>154</sup> Chloé Delaume, 'S'écrire mode d'emploi' in *Autofiction(s) : Colloque de Cerisy*, 2008, pp. 109–126 (p. 111).

<sup>155</sup> Richard, *L'autofiction et les femmes*, p. 17.

example of ‘autofictional self-repositioning’<sup>156</sup> and Gaensbauer focuses on the influence of the Oulipo on her work.<sup>157</sup> Havercroft has concentrated on the performative aspects of Delaume’s construction of autofiction,<sup>158</sup> which I will discuss in the chapter dedicated to her texts, as well as on the way that her autofictional persona functions within her texts through language and the body.

Chloé Delaume’s character is the most fluid in autofictions studied in this thesis. Her autofictional persona is based on a pseudonym and can also be seen as having different facets with different names. Delaume is exceptional in this corpus given her adoption of different characters associated with the narrator and the author. She uses the characters of ‘Clotilde Mélisse,’ ‘Charlie Orphan,’ ‘Adèle Trousseau,’ ‘Emma Begon’ and ‘Anaïs’ who make up different facets of her persona. The creation of new characters that are linked with the narrator and author marks a turning point in the discussion of autofiction within this thesis, which questions the idea of the autofictional pact as between the author, narrator and character within which the character is understood to be one rather than many. This deconstruction of her autofictional persona entails an understanding that her autofictional persona is fully embedded within the texts. Her persona, contained within the confines of the text, is fully embodied by the production of her avatar in *Corpus Simsi*. This text is a reproduction of Delaume’s character within the Sims game, and the avatar was played by various members of an online community. Her malleability of the character produces what Butler has described as a social production of the body; the body no longer belonged to Delaume, in fact it belonged to the members of the online community. This is the most extreme version of the production of an autofictional body and represents the ability of ludic autofiction to play with the boundaries of an autofictional persona.

Éric Chevillard is a peculiar case study in autofiction for a number of reasons. His specificities lie in his ability to parody autofiction through a blog which is then published in book form. I will focus almost exclusively on the texts that are produced from the blog, although comparisons will be made between the book and the blog as they indicate the ways in which his parodic autofiction can function. One article has so far been published on Chevillard’s *L’autofictif* project by Fülöp which calls attention to

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<sup>156</sup> Jordan, ‘*État Présent: Autofiction in the Feminine*’, p. 78.

<sup>157</sup> Gaensbauer, “‘Autofiction + x = ?’ Chloé Delaume’s Experimental Self-Representations’, p. 213.

<sup>158</sup> Barbara Havercroft and Chloé Delaume, ‘Le soi est une fiction’, *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine*, 4 (2012), 126–136 < <http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx04.12> > [accessed 04 March 2015].

the ethical implications of publishing previously free material,<sup>159</sup> and an article has been published by Riendeau on the use of aphorisms in his project.<sup>160</sup> Fülöp also touches on the idea of transgression in his text, and I will call attention to his parodic use of autofiction. Autofiction inevitably calls for an investment of authorial identity, and this fourth chapter will focus on this investment in parody, as well as evaluating the function of other characters within his autofiction.

Éric Chevillard's autofictional project stretches the limits of ludic autofiction in contrast with Chloé Delaume. Whilst Delaume's ludic autofiction extends to playing with her autofictional character, Chevillard constructs his autofiction with parody, playing with the reader through puns and long-running jokes. The autofictional creations, whilst episodic, are updated daily and so have a stronger focus on current affairs than the previous authors which are more focused on episodes relating directly to the autofictional character. Chevillard's autofictional character, on the other hand, is created through the use of referential material and references to his fictional works. Indeed exhortations to buy his other texts have been included in *L'Autofictif* project, linking his corpus simultaneously to the fictional and referential spheres. Chevillard's exploitation of a derivative of autofiction as his title, *L'autofictif*, explicitly engages with the genre of autofiction,<sup>161</sup> and helps to strengthen the network of references that make up his persona, creating more paratextual references.

Critical attention on all four authors so far has been limited, and little investigation has yet been devoted to the discussion of bodies within autofiction as part of the autobiographical persona. Autofiction's very existence began as a literary game, yet as remarked upon earlier, there is a gap in studies on the types of games that authors of autofiction use. According to Gaensbauer in her study of Chloé Delaume, [bodies] 'are ludic constructions that invite the reader into the construction of autofiction as a multimedia process not a portrait.'<sup>162</sup> Indeed, bodies are an obvious sign of ludic construction within autofiction due to this thesis's contention that the body is created

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<sup>159</sup> Erika Fülöp, 'The Blogosphere and the Gutenberg Galaxy and Other Impossible Oppositions: Éric Chevillard's *L'autofictif*' in *Readings in Twenty-First-Century European Literatures* ed. by Michael Gratzke, Margaret-Anne Hutton and Claire Whitehead (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 39–58.

<sup>160</sup> Pascal Riendeau, 'L'aphorisme comme art du détour ou comment Éric Chevillard est devenu *L'autofictif*', *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine*, 4 (2012), 38–48 <<http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx04.04>> [accessed 04 March 2015]

<sup>161</sup> Autofictional authors tend to use the subtitle of '*roman*' to play with the boundaries of fiction and it is one of the Doubrovskian conditions of autofiction discussed in the Introduction. There are no subtitles on the books of the '*autofictif*' project.

<sup>162</sup> Gaensbauer, "'Autofiction + x = ?'" Chloé Delaume's Experimental Self-Representations', p. 217.



from the autofictional text. In this thesis, it will be argued that ludic construction is dependent on autofictional bodies which in turn create autofiction. Without this interdependency, autofiction cannot be presumed to exist. In playing with the character, the autofictional author creates a more rounded persona in which to inhabit. Furthermore, the autofictional text that becomes the boundaries of the persona, the body of the persona, can be brokered through different media.

Yet it is through this interdependency that autofiction's instability can be most clearly seen. Games have the potential to be marginalised as frivolous and as simply imagination rather than real life. In terms of autofictional theory, this particular side-effect of games can help to marginalise the genre still further, plunging the genre into further doubt as to the viability of the autofictional text and persona. Throughout this thesis, ludic representations are to be used to demonstrate the instability and experimentation of autofiction through four authors. Ludic representations within the corpus chosen here demonstrate not only an on-going commitment to playing with the reader, but also demonstrate a way to start to define autofiction.

I have argued that one of the fundamental prerequisites of autofiction is the autofictional persona. Yet this alone is not enough to constitute a genre. Instead I will also focus on the ways that autofiction functions within the confines of language. Part of autofiction's development has included the ability to create different accounts of the same episodes. In contrast with autobiography, texts are able to focus on one short episode at a time, rewriting the episode in a number of different ways. This creates an interesting relationship with the paratext of autofiction, and with an understanding of autofictional truth. Furthermore, paratextual information in autofiction leads to intertextual references and combinations of texts in order to create the referential canon of autofiction. With each transgression from the established canon, and from each intertextual reference of other autofictional writers within autofictional corpus, Derrida's law of genre will be seen to be functioning in this thesis.

I will analyse the autofictional texts from four contemporary French authors to examine the ways that are used to perform the genre. Moving from the more fictional declinations of autofiction, to experimental autofiction and concluding with parody, this thesis aims to shed light on the idea of performance within autofiction, constituting part of autofiction's theoretical position in contemporary French texts.

# Chapter 1: The Porous Limits of Autofiction in the Autofictional Works of Catherine Cusset

*‘une vérité émotionnelle qui émerge dans le croisement des divers fils narratifs’.*<sup>163</sup>

Catherine Cusset

Juxtaposing a postmodern form of truth-telling with innovative narrative strategies, Catherine Cusset understands autofiction as a very personal genre. Cusset’s definition for her autofictional endeavour creates an interesting mix that gives her the scope to use both fictional and autobiographical strategies within one text. For, of course, using ‘emotional’ truth may not be entirely autobiographical and gives rise to one of the criticisms of autofiction; namely, that it is a way to write autobiography without the commitment of autobiography.<sup>164</sup> Yet what type of autofiction can be identified in Cusset’s texts? And what type of referential information can be deduced from an emotional truth?

Catherine Cusset was born in France and has lived in New York for over twenty years, during which time she has published more than eleven fictional and autofictional texts, as well as her own translation of one of her texts.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, Cusset has been involved in academic life; she held a position at Yale, and published a paper on the French Enlightenment.<sup>166</sup> As part of her œuvre, Cusset has been peripherally involved in contributing to autofictional theory through the publication of an essay entitled, ‘L’écriture de soi : Un projet moraliste’,<sup>167</sup> but she has not appeared to be overly concerned with the theorisation of autofiction as have other writers discussed in this thesis.<sup>168</sup>

Catherine Cusset has used various types of narrative strategies within her autofictional œuvre and has played with genre coding, using photography as well as

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<sup>163</sup> Magazine Littéraire Interview with Catherine Cusset, ‘New York, journal d’un cycle de Catherine Cusset’, *Le Magazine Littéraire*, 6 December 2010, <<http://www.magazine-litteraire.com/critique/fiction/new-york-journal-cyle-catherine-cusset-06-12-2010-34310>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>164</sup> Genette, *Fiction et diction*, p. 87.

<sup>165</sup> Catherine Cusset, *Story of Jane* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007) which is a translation of *Le problème avec Jane*.

<sup>166</sup> Catherine Cusset, *Les romanciers du plaisir* (Paris, Champion, 1998) which she has also translated into English.

<sup>167</sup> Catherine Cusset, ‘L’écriture de soi : Un projet moraliste’ in *Genèse et autofiction*, pp. 197–210.

<sup>168</sup> Delaume and Vilain have both published full length theoretical texts on autofiction.

autobiographical and fictional strategies. Given autofiction's original position as a literary genre, this blending of genre creates a fruitful discussion on the possibility of using photography and other media in an ostensibly literary genre. Autofiction, in Cusset's texts therefore, creates a ludic situation, allowing free movement between genres. Cusset's oeuvre can thus be seen in a state of constant evolution through genre coding, giving her autofictional persona the ability to link her texts and become one of the strands that links her oeuvre together. Within this context, her autofictional persona utilizes heterogeneous aspects from genre coding to create her autofictional body.

In my conception of autofiction, the autofictional persona is critical to understanding the genre. Cusset's autofictional persona uses aspects from fictional and referential spheres in order to anchor the persona within the texts. Her use of paratext and intertextual links between her autofictional texts helps to create a web of references that also include different types of media. Through photography, as well as cultural references, Cusset's texts access both the fictional and referential spheres, creating an innovative form of autofiction.

From Cusset's most controversial text, *Jouir*, published in 1999, to texts such as *New York: Journal d'un cycle* published in 2010, her autofictional persona is critical to the construction of her autofiction. Yet her autofictional body, individually created by the reader, is also critical to the understanding of autofiction. Whilst relationships are key subject matter for autofictional texts (although not exclusively so), Cusset's construction of a female gendered autofictional persona requires investigation. Cusset's autofictional body has been subject to outrage from *Jouir* in which she categorises her sexual partners with alphabetical letters. Provoking a strong outcry and denunciations after its publication, *Jouir* remains the most controversial of her texts. Using her autofictional persona in this text, I will explore the contrast between her persona and the male characters to analyse the construction of her autofictional persona. This chapter aims to explore the autofictional persona through Catherine Cusset's distinctive narrative strategies as well as creating an autofictional body.

## **The problem of referentiality**

Autofiction is established through the competing narrative strategies at work through genre coding and can be most clearly seen when the autofictional persona is analysed.

Yet these competing narrative strategies also create a contested site. One of the ways that autofiction can be seen as problematic is through the clash of referential and fictional information, partly portrayed through the autofictional persona. Yet how can both the referential and the fictional co-exist within the same space? Can this possibility yield productive openings? How is referential and fictional information conveyed?

Autofictional texts are expressly interested in playing with the boundaries of what constitutes autobiography and fiction, creating a type of literature highly dependent on authorial construction. Usually, autofictional personae depend on the name of the main character to provide a link between the narrator, author and main character, as has been done in Doubrovsky's *Fils*. Cusset's approach in her autofictional texts, however, has been to elide use of a main character's name and her own definition of autofiction is particularly close to the definition of fiction, one of which is as follows, '[c]ar l'autofiction, c'est justement cela : l'histoire de rien du tout, l'histoire la plus banale, sa propre histoire où on n'invente rien et qu'on appelle "roman."' <sup>169</sup> Of course, by this definition of autofiction (using her life as the basis for texts that are sold under the moniker of fiction) inevitably makes autofiction in Cusset's texts somewhat difficult to read. Further, her statement that 'où on n'invente rien' is not strictly true as she does admit to moving aspects of the narration in her texts. <sup>170</sup> In the instances where she does use a name for her main characters, that of the main character differs from that of the author, and her texts become perilously close to autobiographical novels. The very fact, however, that they imply some doubt, in contrast with autobiographical novels, demarcates them as autofictional. Gasparini in his first landmark study of autofiction wrote, '[I]es romans autobiographiques ne souscrivent aucun contrat de référentialité et se soustraient à tout dispositif de vérification. Ils relèvent donc probablement, par défaut, des énoncés fictionnels'. <sup>171</sup> Although Gasparini goes on to qualify his statement that the autobiographical novel should be distinguished from fiction through the identity of the narrator, <sup>172</sup> the most important difference between autobiographical novels and autofictions used in this thesis is the extent to which referentiality is used, and the terms under which it is conducted. Despite this difference, as Boyle remarks, '[i]n a reversal of the priorities associated with autobiography, *autofiction* participates in a valorisation

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<sup>169</sup> Cusset, 'L'écriture de soi : Un projet moraliste', p. 200.

<sup>170</sup> Magazine Littéraire Interview with Catherine Cusset, 'New York, journal d'un cycle de Catherine Cusset'.

<sup>171</sup> Gasparini, *Est-il je ?*, p. 18.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

of the imagination which takes precedence over any commitment to representing an extra-textual reality'.<sup>173</sup> Autofiction's specificity is rooted in its appeal to referentiality whilst marking its fictionality; it directly contradicts Cusset's definition seen earlier in this chapter. In fact, playing with genres is part of the strength of Cusset's autofictional project, and the reader becomes mired in uncertainty and doubt concerning the generic nature of each text. Indeed as I will demonstrate, the difficulties of reading autofiction in her texts demonstrate the instability of the genre itself.

Cusset creates her autofictional persona whilst making appeals to both the referential and the fictional spheres. In my conception of autofiction, autofictional personae are the critical component that can appeal to each sphere. In Cusset's case, however, there is some instability regarding her autofictional persona. Her autofictional persona can be seen as appealing more to the fictional sphere than the referential sphere. Cusset's persona does not usually refer to her name in the texts, although references to her profession as an academic are common. Furthermore, the texts often use fictional strategies in the epitext, giving more indices of fiction. This difference is easiest to see when combined with an example, and in Cusset's case, *Confessions d'une radine*,<sup>174</sup> published in 2003, neatly illustrates her deeply unstable persona and the narrative strategies she uses. I will use this text in particular in an attempt to show that the doubt and uncertainty present in her texts contribute to an unstable version of autofiction.

*Confessions d'une radine* is written using a first-person narrator and is composed of fragments of memories, as if to evoke a stream of consciousness. Cusset describes memories relating to times when the main character was particularly mean about money, in seven chapters dealing with different aspects of her life, culminating in a discussion over her use of words. There is no overall plot to follow, and no chronological order to the fragments, creating a chaotic narrative. The fragments themselves appear to be a collection of childhood and adulthood memories, together with anecdotes and reflections by the first-person narrator. *Confessions d'une radine* accesses both indices of fiction and of referentiality.

Cusset's text does not have a front cover subtitle, giving the first clue as to the instability of genre in this text. Given the lack of 'roman' on the front page, it might be reasonable therefore to assume that it would belong to the category of autobiography, yet no indication of autobiography is given either. *Confessions d'une radine* uses

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<sup>173</sup> Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies*, p. 18.

<sup>174</sup> Catherine Cusset, *Confessions d'une radine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

chapters to break up the text, with the fragments grouped into one of seven chapters, again creating a sense of uncertainty over the genre of the text. Although Cusset's narrative is broken through the chaotic non-linearity, the fragments do have a common grander theme of miserhood. They vary in length, ranging from one sentence to several pages, yet are connected through the narrator and main character persona, as well as through the underlying miser theme. Fragmentation, therefore, becomes a strategy of both fictionality and referentiality. The fragments are inevitably constructed in a fictional context, linking together possible memories that were not linked at the time of the episode or episodes. In placing them together, Cusset is writing a new order and meaning into them; she is inscribing fictionality onto them. On the other hand, the memories can indeed be read as memory, as a part of an autobiographical endeavour inscribing referentiality into the text. As Doubrovsky asserts, '[a]utrement dit, ce que l'écrivain invente, c'est la reconfiguration de fragments d'existence qu'il réinscrit dans un texte'.<sup>175</sup> Cusset's fragments have become aspects of her personal life and of her intimate life. Each aspect is broken into tiny incidents and through this, Cusset creates a narrative that is both fragmented and drawn together. For example, Cusset writes:

Le livre ne peut pas être bon puisqu'il ne se vend pas. Tout lecteur qui m'estime choisit dans mon estime.

Je mets près de cinq ans à m'en remettre. J'ai peur que les portes me soient dorénavant fermées. Quel éditeur investirait dans ce mauvais placement, un écrivain sans lecteurs?<sup>176</sup>

Although each fragment is separated from the other by extra space on the page, they are connected through reading and writing of the text. Cusset's first-person narrator is making an appeal to the reader, cementing the link between narrator and reader. Of course, these fragments also reference writing and publishing, creating Cusset's autofictional persona which is replicated elsewhere in the text, as can be seen in this extract:

Parfois je me demande si c'est par radinerie aussi que j'écris. Pour que rien ne se perde. Pour recycler, rentabiliser tout ce qui m'arrive. Pour amasser mon passé, le constituer en réserve sonnante et trébuchante. Pour

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<sup>175</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, 'Les points sur les "I"', in *Genèse et autofiction*, p. 62.

<sup>176</sup> Cusset, *Confessions d'une radine*, p. 91. The fragments appear consecutively on the same page and are separated by a gap.

y entrer comme dans une salle au trésor et contempler mes pièces d’or.  
Pour investir et faire fructifier mon capital de sensations et de douleurs.<sup>177</sup>

Cusset is explicitly linking the typical autofictional tropes of recycling episodes of one’s life, and making money out of writing. Her narrator is making an appeal to the referential sphere, as her main character is writing.

Cusset’s autofictional persona is constructed from small links that can be made between the three aspects of the persona, being the narrator, the author and the main character. Throughout *Confessions d’une radine*, the persona makes references as above to writing, and in particular to writing autofiction. More clues can be gleaned from the text, and help to make appeals to the referential sphere to cast doubt on the fictionality inherent in the narrative. Before the beginning of the chapters in *Confessions d’une radine*, the text starts with an epigraph from Proust followed by a fragment set in the centre of the page that references Jean de la Fontaine’s *La Cigale et la Fourmi*, a fable directly relevant to the content of the text.<sup>178</sup> Each chapter appears to follow a linear chronology perpetrating the notion of fictionality, and yet there are instances when this is broken, as if another memory were intruding on the consciousness of the first-person narrator. Often, these are marked such that the memory does intrude in the linear chronology. For example, in the first chapter, Cusset’s linear pattern of fragments progresses until just after mid-way through the section. The present day of the main character who is aged thirty has been evoked, and Cusset writes, ‘[j]e n’ai plus jamais volé’.<sup>179</sup> The next fragment instantly refutes this assertion, succeeded by a memory of the main character’s time as a babysitter when she was nineteen. Through stating the ages of the main character, Cusset is focussing attention on the sudden non-linearity of her text. Her fragment switches to the present day, explicitly declaring, ‘[f]aux. Au supermarché, parfois, quand je remplis un caddy, je glisse un petit truc dans ma poche...’<sup>180</sup> The subsequent fragment switches back in time to when she was nineteen, disrupting the linearity of the account. Furthermore, as the text continues, non-linearity becomes more apparent with Cusset adding memories from when the character was younger, and mixing them throughout the chapters. The fragment also provides an interesting comment on the unreliability of the first-person narrator and author, casting the statements further into doubt. Fragments from when the main character is younger

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<sup>177</sup> Cusset, *Confessions d’une radine*, p. 137.

<sup>178</sup> *La Cigale et la Fourmi* is a moral lesson about the virtues of planning for the future.

<sup>179</sup> Cusset, *Confessions d’une radine*, p. 32.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

are interspersed with those of a more general reflection, usually in comparison with her husband, written in the present tense. *Confessions d'une radine* can therefore be read as a type of autofiction, with appeals to the real as well as the fictional sphere. In casting doubt on the fictionality of her first-person narrator; in creating links between the three aspects of her autofictional persona, and combining these with the impression of memories given through the fragmentation, *Confessions d'une radine* can be said to inhabit a sphere of doubt over its genre.

Cusset does not only play with the boundaries of fiction and autobiography, she also plays with the different expectations given to different genres within life-writing. *Confessions d'une radine* is in part constructed on the basis of a confession narrative with the title of 'Confessions' perhaps paying homage to the father of autobiography,<sup>181</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Cusset is also playing into a literary heritage, firstly through St Augustine and his *Confessions* and secondly through Rousseau. In both writers, an episode of theft has become famous, with Rousseau's ribbon theft and St Augustine's theft of pears, and Cusset is accessing these episodes to give a greater literary heritage to her text. She is also accessing autobiographical heritage through the name. Further impressions are created by the author, through the language that the main character uses, and through the very fragmentation process. Highly personal and intimate details are juxtaposed with ironic fragments such as, '[l]e business, donc'.<sup>182</sup> or, '[j]'aimerais m'en foutre'.<sup>183</sup> These short snippets interspersed with longer fragments describing her emotions, desires, or anecdotes about episodes from her life create a sense of unburdening. The narrator writes that she has a 'dernier aveu à faire',<sup>184</sup> and the last chapter of this text is devoted to writing. Fragments marked by age juxtaposed with others written in the present tense give the text a diary dimension, further playing with the genre classification system. Yet the confessions are grouped together under chapters, and do not have dates, separating them from the genre of diary as understood by Lejeune.<sup>185</sup> *Confessions d'une radine*, therefore, does not fit neatly into the diary genre, nor the autobiographical genres without some inconsistencies. Her project, in *Confessions d'une radine*, is to confuse the genres, revelling in the ambiguity and

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<sup>181</sup> Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*.

<sup>182</sup> Cusset, *Confessions d'une radine*, p. 95.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>185</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le journal intime : Histoire et anthologie* (Paris: Textuel, 2006), p. 23.



uncertainty in the text. Some of this uncertainty which, is present in her texts, can be eliminated through the use of paratextual and extratextual information.

## **Paratext and extra-textual information**

Much research has already been conducted on paratextual information, and Philippe Gasparini in his comprehensive study of life-writing argues that there are three functions of the paratext.<sup>186</sup> The first is to be a contact point between the reader and the author; the second is to create a horizon of expectation with the reader; and finally, the paratext gives information about both the text and the author. Problems appear, however, when, 'l'éditeur, le préfacier, le critique, le journaliste, interviennent également dans la zone paratextuelle pour traduire, ou trahir, les intentions de l'auteur et engager le lecteur sur la voie d'une appréciation plus ou moins fictionnelle ou référentielle'.<sup>187</sup> His position is that the intentions of the author should be translated in the paratextual information given. For Gasparini therefore, authorial intentions can be 'betrayed' by others who intervene in paratextual information, and it is particularly interesting that 'trahir' is used in connection with critics and journalists, suggestive of a greater level of emphasis on authorial intentions. Paratextual information also becomes a problem for Gasparini when the style and form of a work are considered. He states:

S'agissant d'un texte narratif, le lecteur souhaite connaître sa position sur l'axe fiction/réalité. Si l'auteur ne stipule pas expressément son engagement personnel à décrire le réel, le lecteur conclura, par défaut, que la finalité du texte est artistique et son registre fictionnel.<sup>188</sup>

A binary opposition between fiction and reality has been created, both by the theorist and by the imagined reader. Of course, any type of work that does not fit into the rigid classification system, such as autofiction or autobiographical novels, would therefore be excluded and cast into an indeterminate genre.

Using paratextual information within autofiction can result in a greater understanding of the autofictional persona, and can also be instrumental in the codification of autofiction. Both the peritext and the epitext can cement the autofictional status of a text through interviews, as well as public declarations of genre status for a

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<sup>186</sup> The most ground-breaking and significant of the studies published on paratext is Genette's *Seuils*. Gasparini's comprehensive study can be found in Gasparini, *Est-il je ?*

<sup>187</sup> Gasparini, *Est-il je ?*, p. 62.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

text. Autofictional personae must use the name of the author or a derivative of the name in order to be perceived as autofiction. Furthermore, intertextual references to previous texts published by the author gives a stronger web in which the autofictional persona is based. Yet paratextual information can lead to a re-classification of texts such as in the case of Cusset's work *Le problème avec Jane*,<sup>189</sup> published in 1999 and re-published with changes in 2001. In a comparison of the two texts, Cusset has edited phrases and changed some vocabulary as well as adding more information in some sections. Most of this new information has been added to give earlier mentions of Xavier Duportoy,<sup>190</sup> the text's writer and villain, and to give a greater sense of being watched for the denouement of the text.<sup>191</sup> These additions, together with deletions of some scenes, do not change the overall sense or conclusion of the text, however. Paratextual information has thus been used to enhance an autofictional reading of the text, and to provide context in order for the autofictional persona to become more prominent. Yet how can this paratextual information be measured? And how does this affect an autofictional reading?

Rabinowitz puts forward the claim that there are three types of reader; the first of these is the 'actual audience'<sup>192</sup> consisting of those he calls, 'flesh-and-blood'<sup>193</sup>. This readership cannot be modelled due to the lack of authorial control<sup>194</sup> and can be contrasted with the ideal reader evoked by Rabinowitz as the 'authorial audience'.<sup>195</sup> In order to escape accusations of authorial intention surrounding reader theory, Rabinowitz contends that the 'authorial audience' can be construed as, 'the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers.'<sup>196</sup>

Rabinowitz further conceptualises the 'narrative audience'<sup>197</sup> which, 'is a role which the text forces the reader to take on.'<sup>198</sup> This audience, for a novel, is composed of those who believe that the fictional realm is real whilst they are reading. By extension, there is also an ideal narrative audience in which the reader is in an ideal position for the

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<sup>189</sup> Catherine Cusset, *Le problème avec Jane*, 2nd edn (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 2002). All references that follow refer to the edited edition.

<sup>190</sup> Duportoy is mentioned much earlier (p. 21) in the edited edition.

<sup>191</sup> For instance, see *Le problème avec Jane* pp. 51, 55, 149, 213.

<sup>192</sup> Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

narrator. Whilst Rabinowitz has categorized the fictional readers' realm, the same categories can be usefully compared to autofictional narratives given autofiction's reliance on a relationship between the reader and the author. This relationship is key to the success of autofiction as the reader must be able to discern autofictional markers within or without the text. Autofictional readers must be able to identify the autofictional persona, either from paratextual clues or clues within the text, as autofictional. Without this, the autofictional texts cannot be read as such. Paratextual clues such as interviews can present useful information for the autofictional persona, helping to ground the persona in the real. Yet this relationship is complicated by the presence of both autobiographical and fictional markers. To this end, narrative strategies of autobiography and fiction must be included.

In a discussion of narrative strategies of autobiography and fiction, Shen and Xu begin by discussing the difference between autobiography and fiction. In both autobiography and fiction, readers are concerned with how the narrator has constructed the narrative. Yet in autobiography, a reality value for the narrator is also added,<sup>199</sup> and it is this access to reality that Shen and Xu have modelled. In autobiography, Shen and Xu have created a model for what they call the cognizant and uncognizant readers,<sup>200</sup> calling their readings, 'two competing and incompatible reading positions'.<sup>201</sup> These cognizant and uncognizant readers access the text in differing ways dependent on their knowledge of the authorial constructs. Competing interpretations of autofictional texts are therefore possible, adding to the doubt and confusion surrounding the performance of the autofictional persona. I argue that, in the same vein, those who have prior paratextual knowledge reach a different reading of the same text to those who do not. This is most usefully followed by an example of Cusset's texts such as *Le problème avec Jane*, of which I shall be discussing the re-edited version.

*Le problème avec Jane* revolves around a *mise-en-abyme* of Jane, a university lecturer at 'Devayne' in the United States, who is reading a narrative about her life which has been left on her doorstep by an unknown writer. In particular, the text introduces fragments of the main character's thought patterns, suggesting an omniscient narrator which is disputed by the introduction to the text. *Le problème avec Jane* has no genre defining word on the front cover (as is usual in French) but the back cover (and

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<sup>199</sup> Shen and Xu, 'Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality: Unreliability in Autobiography versus Fiction', p. 46.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

the first chapter) has a synopsis with ‘roman’ written on the cover of the fictional text. The text itself is written in prose, with a progressive narrative interspersed with flashbacks. There is no overt expression of relation between character and narrator, yet with the *mise-en-abyme* of the original situation, a tension exists surrounding the supposed genre of the text. Contained within this tension, therefore, is the embryonic attachment of autofiction. Cusset is not the only autofictional writer found using this strategy. Camille Laurens’ *Index*,<sup>202</sup> published in 1991, is also constructed upon a *mise-en-abyme* scenario, with the main character also reading a narrative about her life which has been written by an unknown author. These types of texts reintegrate a sense of doubt and create a sense of oscillation between referentiality and fiction through the *mise-en-abyme*, although *Le problème avec Jane* amplifies the referential clauses further than *Index*.

*Mise-en-abyme* scenarios are most commonly associated with fictional narratives, yet they are also a device within autobiographical narratives. Indeed Colonna has already identified *mise-en-abyme* as an area of interest for autofictional theorists, creating an entire subset of autofiction dependent on *mise-en-abyme*. His ‘autofiction spéculaire’<sup>203</sup>, consisting of the autofictional persona’s reflection rather than an emphasis on reality within the narrative, can be usefully applied here to *Le problème avec Jane*.

*Le problème avec Jane* introduces doubt into the genre categorisation of either fiction or autofiction. There are, however, significant problems with reading the entire text as an autofictional production, in the same way that Colonna’s mirror-image autofiction is problematic. As a basic assumption in my reading of autofiction, the main character must in some way be associated with the author and narrator, usually through their name. In *Le problème avec Jane*, this is evidently not the case due to the title character’s name as Jane, and not Catherine. Despite this, there are comparisons to be made between Cusset’s life and Jane’s (the main character’s life) such as the emphasis on academia which provides a useful focus when read according to the dual reading model as proposed by Shen and Xu. As has already been mentioned, Cusset was a French academic working at Yale, and the university mentioned in *Le problème avec Jane* appears to be modelled closely on that particular institution. Furthermore, the epilogue created after the original publication introduces new doubt at the end of the text. The narrator relates that, ‘[e]lle relut le manuscrit, changea quelques noms, écrivit

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<sup>202</sup> Camille Laurens, *Index* (Paris: P.O.L, 1991).

<sup>203</sup> Colonna, *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires*, p. 119.

le début et la fin ainsi que des passages intercalaires relatant sa réaction à la écriture'.<sup>204</sup> She also writes that Jane signs a contract with Simon and Schuster<sup>205</sup> who publish Cusset's own translation of *Le problème avec Jane*. These small textual clues contribute to a general feeling of doubt and uncertainty found in the text. To further complicate matters, a character entitled 'Catherine', a Frenchwoman, is briefly inscribed into the text,<sup>206</sup> perhaps giving a more autofictional edge to it. 'Catherine' is introduced as Eric's (Jane's ex-husband) new partner who is pregnant, and is also a member of an academic faculty. A subversive intrusion has been added into *Le problème avec Jane* through this character and yet, paradoxically, despite the possible autofictional reading that can be ascribed to the text, Jane does not appear to have personal agency. From the very beginning, Jane is a passive participant and reader of her own history through the *mise-en-abyme* scenario. This is further addressed in the text as a way for the unknown narrator to control her as, 'il pouvait enfin contrôler Jane en la construisant comme personnage'.<sup>207</sup> The addition of the epilogue strengthens the argument for an autofictional reading, although this is not enough to read according to an autofictional mode. *Le problème avec Jane* does not appear to be autofictional due to the narration in the third person with no precise connection to the author. Further, the narrator is part of the *mise-en-abyme* scenario, disguising the autofictional aspects. The homonymy of author, narrator and character is broken and the only elements which point to an autofictional reading are the small clues the reader may have access to from paratextual information.

*Le problème avec Jane* is not the only text of Cusset's that can benefit from a dual reading system. In fact, many of Cusset's texts begin to blur the lines of genre demarcation when they are read in conjunction with previous extra-textual knowledge. One of the recurring features of Cusset's texts is a main character called Marie. *Un brilliant avenir*, which was published in 2008, winning the *Prix Goncourt des lycéens*, uses a character called Marie who has a Romanian step-mother and returns to Brittany each year to spend time with her family. As Ferniot remarks, *Un brilliant avenir* does

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<sup>204</sup> Cusset, *Le problème avec Jane*, p. 457.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 458.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 417.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

use elements specific to Cusset,<sup>208</sup> and yet there are not enough markers in the text to justify an autofictional reading.

Perhaps one of the best examples of Cusset's inscription of autofiction into a text that could otherwise be described as fictional, however, is *En toute innocence*, published in 1995 with no marking indicating genre on the front cover. *En toute innocence* describes various sexual episodes in the life of the first-person narrator from the age of twelve to twenty, detailing a child rape and its aftermath, with subsequent relationships culminating in the protagonist's loss of her virginity. Opening with a scene of child rape, *En toute innocence* immediately presents the first-person narrator in both the position of victimhood and in a type of Lolita situation. Cusset's narrative is written in a stream of consciousness, emphasising the child as narrator and re-creating a memory-driven narrative. *En toute innocence* uses several devices to incorporate autofictional elements into the text, when combined with the dual reading system that has been proposed. Again, one of the markers of Cusset's autofictional elements is bound to her first-person narrator and main character with Marie being used as the name to tie these two aspects together. The names of her siblings are precisely the same as those used in her other texts such as *La haine de la famille*, and familial details are exactly the same. For example, her mother is a judge,<sup>209</sup> her sister is Anne<sup>210</sup> and there are discussions about her mother's Jewish identity<sup>211</sup> which mirror those in *La haine de la famille*. Of course, these elements only function as autofictional indices if the other texts have been read, creating an autofictional sphere in which Cusset operates only to those who are in that sphere already. As Shen and Xu point out, comparison between different texts can be useful<sup>212</sup>; I am suggesting that part of Cusset's oeuvre functions as autofiction to those who can read it as such, creating a two-tiered system consisting of those who can read the references, and those who cannot.

This autofictional sphere is extended by the presence of autofictional themes such as relationships between family members and explicit discussion of the protagonist's female body. The text begins with an explanation of the rape, pre-dating Christine Angot's more widely known discussion of taboo subjects such as incest.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Christine Ferniot, 'Le destin d'Elena', *www.lexpress*, 1 September 2008, <[http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/un-brillant-avenir\\_814864.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/un-brillant-avenir_814864.html)> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>209</sup> Catherine Cusset, *En toute innocence* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 2001), p. 12.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>212</sup> Shen and Xu, p. 46.

<sup>213</sup> Christine Angot, *L'inceste* (Paris: Stock, 1999).

Throughout *En toute innocence*, Cusset's first-person narrator consistently equates the loss of virginity with the assumption of femininity and womanhood. At the same time, however, virginity is highly prized by the narrator with the main character discussing with her friend, Sophie, the importance of being in love with the man who will take her virginity.<sup>214</sup> This dichotomy is resolved in the narration at the end of the text with the first-person narrator's loss of virginity with a married man. The text ends with his supposed death as she leaves him to drown in a lake.<sup>215</sup> The loss of her virginity can also be put into question, given the rape scene at the beginning of the text. In the narrative, the equation of femininity and sex is made many times, beginning with the child at the very start of the text.<sup>216</sup> When Marie visits a psychoanalyst to discuss her inability to stop crying after the death of her nephew, authority is given to this equation. Cusset writes:

Marianne m'a doucement expliqué que c'était là que se trouvait le problème, peut-être pas la clef du problème mais en tout cas son nœud, Arthur parce que c'était un bébé me rappelait la naissance et la naissance m'évoquait le ventre de la mère et le sexe de la femme, mon sexe, la mort d'Arthur avait servi de catalyseur, le vrai problème c'était mon rapport à mon propre corps et à ma féminité, et elle n'avait pas eu de mal à deviner que je n'avais jamais fait l'amour.....<sup>217</sup>

The psychoanalyst's concept of sex as a method for attaining womanhood, and linking her body with femininity can be seen in the rest of the text. This trope can be seen in many other autofictional texts as will be seen in the following chapters. Doubrovsky's use of psychoanalysis has been well documented, and Cusset's use of this character extends the reach of her intertext to implicitly include *Fils*, stretching Cusset's referential sphere and creating a more credible autofictional text. As can be seen already, the instability in genre in Cusset's œuvre has given the potential for instability in gender stereotypes. Yet Cusset's switching of codes in genre also extends to using photography in her texts to introduce more indices of referentiality.

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<sup>214</sup> Cusset, *En toute innocence*, p. 48.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

## Referentiality and photographs

*New York, journal d'un cycle*,<sup>218</sup> one of Cusset's more recent texts, and the most easily identifiable in her œuvre as autofictional, appears to make the distinction between autofiction and fiction in her texts much clearer. In *New York, journal d'un cycle*, Cusset writes of a first person character's struggles with pregnancy and life in New York whilst riding a bicycle. *New York* is the first text in her œuvre to incorporate her partner's voice, creating a new situation in her autofiction. Despite this, the text is strongly centred on her experience and is focussed strongly on the first-person narrator's voice. Navigating from urban spaces to home spaces using her bicycle, the narrator's main character desire to become pregnant begins to create issues with her husband, showcasing traditional roles of gender, and subverting some of them. The text has no markings on the front cover indicating a novel or a narration nor are there any on the back cover. *New York, journal d'un cycle* is the most readily identifiable as autofiction due to the inclusion of Cusset's own picture as part of the text, and a much stronger relationship between the narrator, author and main character persona. The main character's name is Catherine,<sup>219</sup> and many places within New York are identified, giving a greater sense of referentiality. Furthermore, the text is the most unusual in Cusset's corpus given the insertion of images in the text: there are eighteen images against one hundred and six pages of text, serving to create a disordered and fragmented narrative. Images of broken bicycles and bridges predominate and one image of Cusset with a bicycle has been inserted, playing with the notion of reality and authorial insertion. The image of Cusset herself in the text indicates a stronger association with the authorial identity, tying Cusset into an autofictional narrative. As Cusset is writing in a series entitled *Traits et portraits* by Mercure de France, expressly designed for autobiographical writing,<sup>220</sup> the photographs insert both a referential and fictional basis to the text. Further, as Edwards writes:

Incorporating photographs into an autobiography would appear to be an appeal to the real, providing evidence of the author's lived reality beyond the way that she or he may manipulate it in words; photographs constitute a

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<sup>218</sup> Catherine Cusset, *New York, journal d'un cycle* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2009).

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>220</sup> Shirley Ann Jordan, 'Chronicles of Intimacy' in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, pp. 51–78 (p. 60).



physical trace of a reality and seem therefore more referential than language.<sup>221</sup>

To some extent, this is what is given to the reader in *New York, journal d'un cycle* opposite the title page. Cusset has chosen a photograph of New York, creating a simulacrum with the image of New York preceding the text, and substituting reality. An appeal to the real, as Edwards has written, is occurring and provides the basis for the beginning of the autofictional text. Despite the appeal to the real that is suggested, photographs also convey a constructed fictionality,<sup>222</sup> one that is also present in *New York, journal d'un cycle*. As has just been stated, Cusset has inserted a picture of herself (and, the reader assumes, her husband).<sup>223</sup> To some extent, therefore, Cusset is appealing to the real, and yet the picture itself is a posed photograph. Not only is it chosen by the author, placed by her into the text, it is constructed around a fiction.<sup>224</sup> Whilst inserting herself into the text is an autobiographical act, the result of the posed photograph is to cast doubt upon the referentiality of the image, reinforcing the autofictional dimension to her text. I have suggested in the Introduction to this thesis that autofiction is being used by all four authors as a form of linguistic game; one that plays with both the boundaries of narrative and of genre. Cusset's use of photographs in this sense does successfully achieve the narrative goal of disorder in genre conventions and play with different 'languages,' both written and visual.

Disorder is further emphasised in this text with four images of bicycles, each with at least one wheel removed, leaving the cycle incomplete and creating a medium for a distorted narrative. The narrative itself in *New York, journal d'un cycle* is broken into fragments, with some recalling events with the bicycle as an aide-mémoire, others describing her relationship with the narrator's husband with whom she is trying to conceive a child. Jordan points out that, '[a]s a distinctive meeting place, autofiction prioritises rehearsal, experiment, and adventure'.<sup>225</sup> Fragmentation within autofiction can be seen as integration into an established narrative strategy in autobiographical

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<sup>221</sup> Natalie Edwards, 'The Absent Body: Photography and Autobiography in Hélène Cixous's *Photos de racines* and Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*' in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, pp. 79–98 (pp. 80–81).

<sup>222</sup> Alex Hughes, 'Hervé Guibert's Photographic Autobiography: Self-Portraiture in *L'image fantôme*', in *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*, pp. 167–181 (p. 177).

<sup>223</sup> Cusset, *New York, journal d'un cycle*, pp. 98–99. Her supposed husband is on the opposite page in his own picture.

<sup>224</sup> Natalie Edwards, Amy Hubbell, and Ann Miller, 'Introduction' in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, pp. 1–28 (p. 7).

<sup>225</sup> Jordan, 'État Présent: Autofiction in the Feminine', p. 84.

texts. As Grell remarks, autobiographical fragments from authors such as Barthes and Duras are part of a long tradition. She writes:

On oppose habituellement au retour de l'écriture du Je en oubliant qu'il existe entre eux une réelle continuité, une connivence *contre* le culte de la fiction pure du récit, l'obsession de l'intrigue. L'écriture autofictionnelle qui réfléchit (au sens du miroir et de la réflexion) s'inscrit donc dans la filiation directe des écritures expérimentales (surréalisme, structuralisme, Nouveau Roman).<sup>226</sup>

Experimental writing is a strong feature of autofictional texts, and incorporates fragmentation within this. Within a ludic strand of autofiction, fragmentation is used to complicate genre demarcation as well as to perform the autofictional persona. Fragmentation using different genres within one text represents a strand of ludic experimentation in autofiction that can be seen in *New York, journal d'un cycle*. The juxtaposition of both fragments of text, as well as fragments within photographs extends the autobiographical fragmentation used by Roland Barthes in *Roland Barthes*, published in 1975 and Nathalie Sarraute in *Enfance*, published in 1983 amongst others.

Ludic autofiction depends somewhat on the ability of the autofictional persona to play with the expectations of the reader. Using fragmentation as a narrative strategy, therefore, the autofictional author can perform their persona destabilising the reader's perception. At times, fragments may appear to have both fictional and referential components. This can be particularly seen through the use of photographs within autofictional texts. Photographs can be both referential and fictional as they are included in a fictional narrative but also embody 'a physical trace of a reality.'<sup>227</sup> In playing with the expectations of the reader, fragmentation can be seen as a strategy to destabilise the performance of the autofictional persona. Both referential and fictional fragments inform the autofictional persona, lending immediacy to the destabilisation process.

Cusset's fragmentation in *New York, journal d'un cycle*, has evolved from previous work on fragmentation in *Jouir*<sup>228</sup> and can appear disconnected from other events in the text, but they are rarely completely stand-alone fragments. Such is the case when Cusset writes:

Dans les allées du Pré Catelan, ma sœur aînée glisse sur ses patins à roulettes. Elle est parmi les meilleurs ; tous les garçons la regardent. Je joue

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<sup>226</sup> Isabelle Grell, *L'autofiction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014 ), p. 4.

<sup>227</sup> Edwards, 'The Absent Body', p. 80.

<sup>228</sup> *Jouir*'s strategies of fragmentation are discussed later in this chapter.

avec mon frère bébé dans le bac à sable. Je lui construis des pâtés. J'ai horreur des patins et de tout ce qui glisse.<sup>229</sup>

The emphasis, as is usual in her texts, is on the family, and the main character's role within the family. Although this fragment is a memory of a previous time, and therefore appears at first glance disconnected to the present situation of the first-person narrator's inability to conceive, the fragment is both preceded and succeeded by the first-person narrator reminiscing over a family, and wishing she could have a child. Cusset has also described the fragment in the present tense giving the impression of a photograph. Despite the specific focus having switched from a memory to the current day, the family is still the focus of her enunciations and her voice has not changed. Fragments inherently break up the narrative, although the idea of language games or a new form of syntax is not overt in the narrative structure in *New York, journal d'un cycle*. The language in particular has no particular novelty; there are no neologisms used, and the grammatical structure of French remains in place. In fact, the grammatical structure is even simplistic in construction, rather than complex as one might expect from a text purporting to be part of a radical new genre. Although Cusset does not practice language games through syntax in the same way as other authors in this thesis, *New York, journal d'un cycle* uses fragmentation and photographs to create a complex image of autofiction wherein the innovation rests upon playing with genre conventions. Despite this, Cusset also uses English in a way similar to Doubrovsky, re-creating another dimension of autofiction although the English itself does not add another layer of complexity to the text. The instances of her using English are usually only with swearing at other users of the bicycle lane, and 'bike lane' itself appears twice in the text in English. Although the idea of playing with the language has been used, the integrity of the text has not been broken; it adds to the sense of fragmentation surrounding autofiction, yet again, the sense of a new style of writing, of a new form has not been promoted here.

Cusset's autofictional project within *New York, journal d'un cycle* as one that rests upon genre conventions is explicit from the start of the text. The title frame uses both 'journal' and 'cycle', creating juxtaposition between the two, and instantly establishes the reader within a life-writing paradigm. 'Journal' can have different meanings (dependent on context), such as newspaper, diary or journal and using them in

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<sup>229</sup> Cusset, *New York, journal d'un cycle*, p. 48.

an autofictional sense when the paratextual information surrounding the subtitle is scrutinised, plays with the idea of genre and of autofiction. 'Cycle' also creates an air of expectation within autofiction as the genre is often used for re-cycling or re-writing past events so as to give a different truth or emphasis to the text.<sup>230</sup> In this particular context, within the text, 'cycle' could also refer to many different ideas such as women's hormonal or reproductive cycles, bicycles as well as monotony. The first-person narrator encourages this polysemy, pointing out:

On dit un cycle infernal, un cercle vicieux, le cycle menstruel, le cycle des saisons. On recycle les journaux, les bouteilles et les employés. On programme les cycles des machines à laver. Ça ne tourne pas rond là-dedans. On tourne en rond, on n'avance pas. On en a fait le tour.<sup>231</sup>

As the text indicates, the permutations are endless, but all point to an ambiguity and uncertainty in the text mirroring the doubt expressed in conceptions of autofiction. Referencing autofiction whilst writing it is certainly not a new trope with the genre, and Cusset's discussion of the cycle is only one facet of this.

Throughout *New York, journal d'un cycle*, the text uses the bicycle as a freedom motif through the dialogue of the protagonist. Often, the bicycle is used as a way to escape the construct of her relationship, and is also used as a way to open up social barriers. The bicycle is also seen as constructing a problem with her husband since he roller-blades rather than cycles. Despite the freedom that the bicycle appears to engender, the bicycle does not come to mean freedom in the text. An image of a ghost bike is used towards the end of the text, indicating that this freedom ends in death. Ghost bikes are a global movement that started in St Louis, Missouri and commemorate cyclists who were killed on the road. A ghost bike (a bicycle painted white) is left at the side of the road where the incident happened, usually with a small plaque stating the name of the rider. One of the photographs Cusset has chosen has the following caption: 'Eric Ng 22 Years Old Killed By Drunk Driver'.<sup>232</sup> The ghost bike is a way for Cusset to insert herself into contemporary culture, to be part of a global movement. Eric Ng's ghost bike exists in New York, where there are many photographs of his bicycle<sup>233</sup>. His profile on ghost bikes<sup>234</sup> also reveals his existence. As Sontag writes, '[a] photograph

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<sup>230</sup> For more on re-writing, see: Cathy Jellenik, *Rewriting Rewriting: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, and Marie Redonnet* (New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>231</sup> Cusset, *New York, journal d'un cycle*, p. 112.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>233</sup> Google Images yields many results for a search including the terms, "Eric Ng ghost bike".

<sup>234</sup> 'Ghost Bikes Eric Ng' <<http://ghostbikes.org/new-york-city/eric-ng>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture'.<sup>235</sup> Cusset is again playing with genre expectation and inserting new types of media into her text. Through using the ghost bike, Cusset's text becomes intertwined with a global movement, and incorporates not only an innovative medium, but also a new form of expression. Furthermore, by inserting herself into a sphere that is recognisably referential, Cusset is creating a more autofictional text. She is appealing to an extra-textual reality, and grounding it in memories of New York City. Yet again, however, the ghost bike can only function in relation to the reader's prior knowledge of the phenomenon creating different classes of reader, and reinforcing the dual reading system discussed earlier.

Catherine Cusset's use of photographs in her text, *New York, journal d'un cycle*, help to create both a referential and fictional system, creating doubt and confusion as to the genre of her text, something that is common to all of her texts. Doubt is sown in Cusset's œuvre through her autofictional persona, due to her use of fictional characters, despite the referential techniques portrayed with photographs. Instability is further demonstrated through her definition of truth in autofiction<sup>236</sup> and her problematisation of the self.

The dual reading system proposed by Shen and Xu can be usefully applied to autofictional readings of Catherine Cusset's texts, and also opens the door to thinking about innovation in her œuvre. With the sporadic use of fragmentation, and playing with the nature of narrator, Cusset's texts use autofiction to play with the notion of selfhood. In the next section of this chapter, I will use Cusset's texts to demonstrate her constructs of masculinity and femininity in an attempt to see the limitations of her autofiction in the field of innovation. Autofiction's reputation as a way to formulate femininities<sup>237</sup> through discussions of the body and typically familial subjects will be discussed through the lens of Cusset's œuvre to discover the extent to which this experimentation with autofictional practices is extended into gender constructs.

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<sup>235</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 5.

<sup>236</sup> Catherine Cusset, 'L'écriture de soi : Un projet moraliste' in *Genèse et autofiction*, p. 201.

<sup>237</sup> Camille Laurens, '(Se) dire et (s')interdire' in *Genèse et autofiction*, pp. 221–228 (p. 221).

## Gender constructions

Autofiction is in a peculiar position, making public that which is normally private through its traditional subject matter. As Duncan writes, '[t]he binary distinction between private and public spaces and the relation of this to private and public spheres is highly problematic'.<sup>238</sup> She further states that the domestic is frequently confused with the private sphere,<sup>239</sup> giving autofiction a platform to play upon. 'Vie intérieure' or 'vie intime' are written into autofiction, partly through the definition of autofiction, displacing the normally separate spheres of private and public. Through writing about the private sphere, including the family, authors are discussing subjects previously not open for discussion. As Gasparini remarks, autofiction shares the same discrediting effects that 'littérature intime'<sup>240</sup> has experienced with the exclusion of the self from literature. Yet the exhibition of the self in literature is not a new phenomenon. Autobiographical writing has often been seen to render private lives within the public domain with a commensurate understanding of the danger posed by inscribing their character in a text. Indeed, Leiris is concerned with precisely this danger in his text, 'De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie'.<sup>241</sup> With the inscription of the autobiographical character, come accusations of falsity. This is a recurring theme within autobiographical writing; that by exposing the private sphere to the public, a level of danger is undertaken. Philippe Vilain writes that:

Il y a en effet une grande contradiction dans le fait d'accuser un texte autobiographique de narcissisme et de lui dénier, en même temps, toute capacité propre d'imagination, puisque la particularité de l'imagination autobiographique est justement de provenir de sa capacité de dédoublement narcissique qui permet au sujet de s'inventer un double, idéal ou non, et de rendre possible une forme d'autofictionnalisation.<sup>242</sup>

Whilst Vilain is discussing the specific charges levelled at autofictional authors, charges of narcissism and a lack of imagination have been given to autobiographical writers.

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<sup>238</sup> Nancy Duncan, 'Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces', in *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 127–144 (p. 127).

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>240</sup> Gasparini, *Est-il je ?*, p. 9.

<sup>241</sup> Michel Leiris, 'De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie', in *L'âge d'homme : précédé par 'De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie'*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 9–24.

<sup>242</sup> Philippe Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 119.

Yet autofiction's specificity lies in the extremity of the private life forced to confront the public sphere. One of the difficulties of writing a private life has always been that one's private life intersects with many others, creating a situation in which the private lives of others are discussed within the confines of autofiction. Indeed Jordan writes that autofiction has now become the most legally difficult genre because of what she has termed, 'the ethics of consent'<sup>243</sup> Autofiction's primary concern is with relationships, as can be seen in the subject matter of all of the texts studied in this thesis. Further, some autofictional writers are concerned with explicit displays of body, and sexual acts displaying more of their private lives.<sup>244</sup> This positioning of public and private creates an inherent tension in autofiction, and one that can be seen particularly in the case of motherhood.

Cusset's texts are often concerned with motherhood, whether through the relationship of the main character to her own mother, or through the search of a protagonist to become a mother for the first time as is the case in *New York, journal d'un cycle*. For Chodorow, over the last two centuries, '[t]he family became a quintessentially relational and personal institution, *the* personal sphere of society'.<sup>245</sup> In each family, a microcosm of society is played out, and yet it is kept in the private sphere. Autofiction, in contrast, makes this private sphere public, exposing the family and in this particular case, motherhood to the spectator's gaze through the texts produced. As Jordan also writes, motherhood is a key concern of autobiographical writing.<sup>246</sup> Further, autofiction exposes the intimate and personal lives of its authors, and usually exploits relationships as its material. Part of Cusset's specificity also lies in her use of highly explicit explorations of her sexuality which will be discussed later in this section.

## Motherhood

Motherhood is at the core of two of Cusset's works as well as on the peripheries of other works in her œuvre and is a way for her to construct femininity. One of these

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<sup>243</sup> Shirley Jordan, 'Autofiction, Ethics and Consent: Christine Angot's *Les Petits*, p. 1.

<sup>244</sup> For example: Annie Ernaux, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.', *L'Infini*, 56 (1996), 25–26. Many thanks to Lyn Thomas who made this text available to me.

<sup>245</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 4.

<sup>246</sup> Shirley Ann Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's visions, women's voices, women's lives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 90.

texts, *La haine de la famille*, published in 2001, concerns the relationships between members of a family, particularly the women, and the deterioration of the grandmother through ill-health and old age. In this text, her main character's preoccupation with her mother dominates the text as she describes episodes with her mother designed to show different female characters such as her grandmother, mother and sister. Cusset's character construction is through the first-person narrator, and there are indications of an autofictional creation within the text due to the references to writing. Cusset's narrator writes that the autobiographical persona's mother is '[s]uprême que je réussisse à écrire un livre dont elle tourne une à une les pages sans s'ennuyer un instant, où elle sente que tout est vrai – pas au niveau des faits mais de l'émotion'.<sup>247</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter, Cusset's definition of autofiction is exactly mirrored in her character's description of the text with 'vrai' clearly meaning genuine rather than true. Furthermore, there are additional reminders to the reader that an author as first-person narrator is writing this text, giving an autofictional reading greater weight. Because one of the indicators of autofiction is a level of doubt surrounding the categorisation of the text, Cusset's *La haine de la famille*, uses markers of referentiality to question the undeniably fictional characteristic of the structure of the narrative. Using this autofictional text, I will therefore go on to discuss the role of motherhood as a way to construct femininity in *La haine de la famille*.

One of the conclusions reached in *La haine de la famille*, is that female sexuality is better repressed than expressed. Anne, the sister of the first-person narrator, divorces her husband for Patrick, another lover, only to leave him whilst struggling to keep her children in a custody battle. She is criticised by her mother in the text for divorcing her children's father, which is taken as a sign of bad motherhood. Elvire, the protagonist's mother, remarks that, 'Anne est belle, elle attire les hommes, mais deux petits enfants ça suffit à faire fuir n'importe qui'.<sup>248</sup> For the mother, Anne's ability to attract a new husband depends on the loss of her children. In contrast to this, the first-person narrator argues that Anne is a good mother,<sup>249</sup> but although the text's portrayal of the mother is not universally positive, Anne's situation does end with the loss of her children to her ex-husband and so the text therefore implicitly espouses this viewpoint. Thus motherhood, in *La haine de la famille*, presents a challenge to the order of heterosexual

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<sup>247</sup> Cusset, *La haine de la famille*, p. 105.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 136.



stability as seen through marriage. This can also be seen in the text's portrayal of Elvire, the grandmother of the protagonist who brought up her children as a single parent after the death of her husband. The text does not comment particularly on this phenomenon, but in its very absence, the text's implicit acceptance of her choice not to remarry is positive. Motherhood can be used as a way to signal the heterosexual matrix in texts. Habib writes that:

For most of this long history women were not only deprived of education and financial independence, they also had to struggle against a male ideology condemning them to virtual silence and obedience, as well as a male literary establishment that poured scorn on their literary endeavours. Indeed, the depiction of women in male literature – as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures – was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender.<sup>250</sup>

Despite this, Cusset's descriptions of motherhood do not always follow this same pattern. In *La haine de la famille*, the title is not the only place that Cusset plays with the image of motherhood as overwhelming positive. Mother's day, usually a celebration of motherhood, is given as a gateway to the Holocaust as in common cultural perception it was instituted by Marshal Pétain during the Vichy regime.<sup>251</sup> Cusset writes:

Maman crie haut et fort qu'elle ne veut pas qu'on célèbre la fête des mères : c'est Pétain qui a institué ce rituel. Travail, famille, patrie. Elle dit son horreur de la famille, de toutes ces saintes institutions qui conduisent au massacre de six millions.<sup>252</sup>

Of course, the mother in this section exaggerates her horror of the day, and yet her reaction reveals a little of the complex dynamic at play in the portrayal of motherhood. The mother here is echoing her lack of agency in the mother's day celebration; as a mother she is subsumed into a category and loses her agency. Despite the mother's professed hatred of Mothers' Day and the 'horror of the family', she has herself created her own family with children, presenting a dichotomy to the reader. Further, the mother figure looks after her own mother who becomes ill and suffers from dementia, creating a type of pseudo-mother of the child. Cusset also humorously compares her first-person narrator to a Nazi, given that she does not like her mother. She writes, '[c]'est ça que je ne supporte pas : l'autre. | C'est le début du nazisme. | Le nazi, c'est moi. Moi qui

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<sup>250</sup> Rafey Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 666.

<sup>251</sup> In fact, although the Vichy regime inscribed it on the calendar, the regime did not invent the day.

<sup>252</sup> Cusset, *La haine de la famille*, p. 187.

n'aime pas ma mère'.<sup>253</sup> The picture of motherhood in its simplicity as espoused by Habib is clearly not the one on display here. Instead, the picture of domesticity is given a tension in the trope of motherhood, creating a more radical view of the private sphere than has been suggested by Habib, yet motherhood is not explored from the first-person narrator's point of view.

*New York, journal d'un cycle* on the other hand, is more explicitly involved in motherhood from the protagonist's perspective. Throughout this text, motherhood is presented as a compulsion for the main character and engages her in a struggle with her husband over fertility. For the first time, Cusset develops the male character in *New York, journal d'un cycle*, something not previously seen in her œuvre. Although the male husband's name is never mentioned explicitly, dialogue between the characters is introduced and the husband develops some degree of agency. He is shown to have influence over the first-person narrator, yet this is mitigated by the lack of presence he has in the text. For example, he threatens the main character's plan to have children by refusing to cooperate. Cusset writes that, '[i]l me répond en articulant lentement : "Tu es en train de détruire l'espace qui me permet de désirer un enfant."'”<sup>254</sup> Throughout the text, the male voice is consistently seen as less willing to have a child, and to be a silent presence in the text. Instead, the space is taken with Catherine, the main character, and her obsession to have a child.

Motherhood is highly desired by Catherine<sup>255</sup> and appears to cloud the rationality of the first-person narrator. One of the most striking incidents in the text is a reversal of traditional gender roles and domestic violence that has been precipitated by the lack of motherhood. Throughout this text, motherhood is seen as an identity that the first-person narrator would like to possess, and yet cannot access. In the incident, Catherine loses control to such an extent that she strikes her husband and is sent to hospital for a broken finger. Much of the text is concerned with a lack of a child, with both characters assuming traditional gender roles. Rationality and the husband are inextricably linked whereas hysteria and Catherine, the female main character, are emphasised together perpetuating stereotypes of gender. Cusset writes:

À l'hôpital aussi les infirmières ont beaucoup ri en se démenant sur  
l'alliance et la bague de fiançailles qui ne voulaient pas passer et qu'elles

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>254</sup> Cusset, *New York, journal d'un cycle*, p. 48.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

ont cisaillées, tout en remarquant qu'elles n'auraient sûrement pas ri autant si un homme leur avait dit s'être cassé le doigt en tapant sur sa femme.<sup>256</sup>

In highlighting the incident where Catherine both repeats and perpetuates the act through discussion with the nurses at the hospital, Cusset reinforces the transgression of gender roles and the violence this causes. This is also highlighted by the gender of the nurses – they are marked as female. It is interesting to note that the violence occurred because of a breach of gender roles; her inability to conceive a child. Catherine describes the ability to have a child as natural, implying she is unnatural and wrong for her inability to do so. Cusset writes, 'mon désespoir infantile pour arriver à produire quelque chose d'aussi simple et de naturel'.<sup>257</sup> After the violation has occurred, Catherine decides to no longer want to have children and her transgressive nature is stabilised. Benedetti writes of the mother role that, '[t]oo weak socially to act as a positive role model, and at the same time too closely linked with her biological role, the mother proves incapable of posing a challenge to society'.<sup>258</sup> Cusset transforms her character after this reduction to motherhood, posing a challenge to society and appropriating a negative male figure, that of the abuser. The text ends with a reconciliation of the couple and a picture of sunset (or sunrise) over New York, with no child in evidence or forthcoming. With the lack of a child, the identity of motherhood has not been fulfilled, and the main character's breach now appears retrospectively as one of claiming an identity with motherhood. Instead, Cusset's autofictional persona focusses on motherhood as a way of identifying womanhood.

Contrary to media discourse which presents motherhood as ideal and natural,<sup>259</sup> Cusset's character is not able to have children at the present moment, and presents her body as a contested space. Her character therefore both conforms and rejects contemporary stereotypes surrounding women and mothers. Cusset's character rejects the narrative that motherhood is a, 'romanticised, idealised'<sup>260</sup> state, yet she also focusses on motherhood as a way to obtain womanhood. Presenting juxtaposition, Cusset ultimately rejects motherhood as the catalyst for womanhood, and ends the text with her main character at peace.

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., pp. 113–114.

<sup>257</sup> Cusset, *New York, journal d'un cycle*, p. 21.

<sup>258</sup> Laura Benedetti, *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>259</sup> Natalie Edwards, 'Véronique Olmi and Laurence Tardieu on Motherhood' in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature*, pp. 98–112 (p. 105).

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

As explained earlier *New York, journal d'un cycle* discusses the main character's desire to have a child through the use of a bicycle. In a new departure for Cusset, a prologue is given with New York as the focal point, and the text begins with two pictures placed four pages apart. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the simulacrum created by the insertion of photographs creates an image of reality, rather than reality itself. As Baudrillard writes, '[l]a photo et le cinéma ont largement contribué à séculariser l'histoire, à la fixer dans sa forme visible, "objective," aux dépens des mythes qui la parcouraient'.<sup>261</sup> The two photographs can be seen as of the same space, despite the changes, through the advertisements of beer, Coca-Cola, Samsung, HSBC and Kodak, creating a space through which an indirect comment on consumerism has been made. In both pictures, there is a cyclist, yet the second picture is more recognisably of New York, given the iconic yellow taxis present. The idea of simulacra is arguably more present in *New York, journal d'un cycle* due to Baudrillard's use of America as subject matter in *Amerique*, again lending Cusset's text a literary heritage. Her prologue text describes a city with many changes of the years, as well as her relationship with her own body. Relationships within autofiction are a common trope, and yet Cusset subverts the traditional version of relationships in her work. *New York, journal d'un cycle* uses the bicycle as a metaphor for changing and creating new networks within a city. The bicycle is used throughout the text as a way to create relationships within the bicycle network which would not otherwise be possible. Throughout the text, the bicycle becomes a symbol for the power dynamics at play within it. Cusset writes:

C'est ça que j'aime avec le vélo : la solidarité. Elle seule permet à un seigneur du vélo d'aborder une bourgeoise blanche pour lui donner librement et sans agressivité un conseil dont elle devait prendre de la graine, *don't panic, relax*.<sup>262</sup>

The bicycle is a symbol of the possibility to overcome class differences and the ability to forge relationships through a shared experience. Despite the main character's reaction to the incident as one of harmony between the two cyclists, the picture is not as rosy as it might first appear. Although they are able to connect over the bicycle and rules of the bike lane, the main character is unable to escape her gender construction and does not challenge the status quo. She is looked after by the male character who calms her because of her sex. In fact, the sex of the female first-person narrator is emphasised here

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<sup>261</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), p. 76.

<sup>262</sup> Cusset, *New York, journal d'un cycle*, p. 25.

to ‘prove’ that the bicycle is a way for the two characters to interact. Yet in this very proof lies the crux of the issue – the need for Cusset to mention it predicates that the situation was unusual and aberrant. Through the choice of either rollerblades or bicycles, with the husband choosing rollerblades and Catherine the bicycle, the relationship between the husband and the main character is exemplified. These two methods of transport are shown in binary opposition with the rollerblades described in unflattering terms by the cyclists, creating a sense of identity amongst both communities.<sup>263</sup> Similarly, it is seen as a symbol of discord in the narrator and main character’s relationship with her husband. The bicycle becomes the focus of an argument between the first-person narrator and her husband when the main character is involved in an altercation with another bike user.<sup>264</sup> Her husband recounts another incident with a woman who stood up to a child with a revolver and was shot. Of course, the implication in the text is that the woman was shot, and that Catherine might be too if she does not respect the bike lane rules. Any transgressions from the rules will be paid for with her life. In spite of the stated usefulness of the bicycle to challenge gender roles, they are in fact reinforced. By using the bicycle as a tool to discuss her relationship with her husband, Cusset seeks to challenge the gender roles set. Cusset, however, does not appear to challenge the status quo at all, and at the end, nothing appears to have changed in their relationship and the text finishes with, ‘[c]’était une belle journée’.<sup>265</sup> As part of a genre of contention and doubt, Cusset’s text *New York, journal d’un cycle* nuances the presentation of gender stereotypes and presents a more complex dissection of motherhood.

## Explicitness

Autofiction is primarily predicated on the basis of descriptions of the personal lives of authors, and authorial identity is constructed from the self. The idea of the body is deeply implicated in both of these conceptions. As has been argued in this chapter, the texts therefore straddle the divide between public and private spaces, giving to the public space its relation of private events and selves. One of Cusset’s texts, *Jouir*, demonstrates the level to which some autofictional authors will carry their transgression of the lines of fiction and autobiography. *Jouir*, published in 1999, is a text composed of

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

fragments describing a first-person narrator's series of sexual encounters. *Jouir* is also a forerunner of the more controversial *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*<sup>266</sup> which was strongly criticised at the time of publication in 2001. *Jouir* was also highly criticised at the time of publication as Cooper points out.<sup>267</sup> Of course, the very title of Cusset's work evokes associations with 'jouissance', continuing in a long tradition of association between reading, writing and pleasure. *Jouir* carries very little paratextual information surrounding the genre of the work on the front covers, and on the preface pages. 'Roman' is not written on the front cover in the Folio edition, and the back cover of the book conveys no sense of fiction or otherwise. No indication to the contrary in the paratextual information is given, however. In fact, when *Jouir* is written in lists of publications, it is presented as a novel. Despite this lack of formal identification of *Jouir* as autofictional on the text itself, Cusset has claimed that in *Jouir*:

I had only one ambition, which was to speak about myself in the most accurate way possible. to speak about me: my sex life, my desire, my love affairs – that is to speak about what most mattered in my life.... I decided to write this text not as a linear narrative, because this linearity would not have allowed for the representation of the multiplicity of desire, but rather as a mosaic of small scenes, without commentary, the raw narration of facts and the juxtaposition of stories that contain within themselves their own commentary.<sup>268</sup>

An oddity from the back cover can be found as it is written in the third person, in contrast with the first-person narrator found throughout the book, and making an appeal to the fictional sphere through this disconnection. The first-person narrator uses fragmentation as a tool to describe her life, in the same way as used in *Confessions d'une radine*, and a further referential clue is given through the way that the first-person narrator describes her partners. All male characters in the book are described as objects, and are referenced with letters of the alphabet, suggesting progression and stagnation, as well as a referential issue. Letters can be used in autobiographical texts to indicate a wish to preserve anonymity for living humans; to avoid lawsuits such as the infamous

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<sup>266</sup> Catherine Millet, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (Paris: Seuil, 2001). This text can be seen as presenting a greater challenge to existing systems than Cusset's *Jouir*, given the genre marking of 'récit' on the front cover.

<sup>267</sup> Sarah Cooper, 'Catherine Cusset's Economies', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 42 (2005), pp. 50–61 (p. 50).

<sup>268</sup> Catherine Cusset, 'The Nieces of Marguerite Duras: Novels by Women at the Turn of the Twentieth-Century', in *Beyond French Feminisms: Debates on Women, Politics, and Culture in France, 1981-2001*, ed. by Roger Célestin, Eliane Françoise DalMolin, and Isabelle De Courtivron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 161–175 (pp. 161–162).

Dobrovsky-Weitzmann affair<sup>269</sup> or the Angot affair.<sup>270</sup> In the same vein, Philippe Vilain, analysed at length in the next chapter, was introduced to autofiction through Annie Ernaux's discussion of him in, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.'<sup>271</sup> and as 'W', one of the main characters in her text *L'occupation*.<sup>272</sup> *Jouir*, therefore, through using the letters of the alphabet does give a sense of blurred referentiality to the text. The first-person narrator's character is never addressed by name in *Jouir* and there are very few textual clues as to the identity of the character; whether she is Catherine Cusset or a fictional character. It is within this doubt surrounding the genre of the text, at the margins of fiction and of autobiography, that autofiction can exist.

One of the ways in which Cusset plays with the concepts of novel and autofiction is through the temporal progression or lack thereof through the text. Each encounter and partner holds similarities, particularly through the continuity of letters of the alphabet. Very little information is provided about Cusset's male characters in *Jouir* except that they are universally undeveloped; there is little or no character development and all the male characters are referred to by letters from A to Z or by their country of origin.<sup>273</sup> The lack of characterisation in Cusset's descriptions of male characters indicates interchange-ability leading to a loss of identity for the male characters. It can be argued, therefore, that treating the male characters as objects of sexual desire feminises the text, and reverses the usual gendered objectification. In this way, it could be argued that Cusset is rejecting masculine discourse and taking her body back as Hélène Cixous has exhorted. Cixous writes: that 'l'écriture est la possibilité même du changement.'<sup>274</sup> In writing so explicitly of her sexual desire, Cusset's text can be seen as a challenge to the establishment. Cixous further writes of, '[l]es vrais textes de femmes, des textes avec des sexes de femmes.'<sup>275</sup> Cusset's text, *Jouir*, at first glance appears to follow this approach. Yet, is this challenge a challenge to masculine discourse, or does it perpetuate the same problems that Cixous has identified?

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<sup>269</sup> Libération, 'Dobrovsky contre Weitzmann', [www.liberation.fr](http://www.liberation.fr), 28 August 1997, <<http://www.liberation.fr/livres/0101221506-dobrovsky-contre-weitzmann>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>270</sup> Jérôme Dupuis, 'Procès : Christine Angot a-t-elle dépassé les limites de l'autofiction?', [www.lexpress.fr](http://www.lexpress.fr), 25 March 2013, <[http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/procès-christine-angot-a-t-elle-dépasse-les-limites-de-l-autofiction\\_1234607.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/procès-christine-angot-a-t-elle-dépasse-les-limites-de-l-autofiction_1234607.html)> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>271</sup> Ernaux, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.'

<sup>272</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L'occupation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

<sup>273</sup> Again the back cover exaggerates the extent to which this life will be re-created, as more male characters than letters of the alphabet are involved in the creation of the text, disrupting the linear progression suggested by the paratext.

<sup>274</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Le rire de la Méduse,' *L'Arc*, 61, 1975, pp. 39–54, (p. 42).

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

Throughout *Jouir*, the character is searching for men and using them to fulfil the character's desire; they are simply objects.<sup>276</sup> Her desire for men is equated with a desire for rape and violence. Yet, I would argue that this would be to over-simplify the dynamics in this text. Instead, Cusset does not appear to liberate the female character; she becomes other than female. Cooper argues that Cusset, 'is rethinking the connection between sexuality, writing and spending in these texts in a way that does not realign the feminine with the masculine in regressive fashion'.<sup>277</sup> She also states, '[f]ar from being the sole preserve of the male though, the female specificity of the narrator-protagonist's desire is everywhere apparent'.<sup>278</sup> Certainly, the female character's body is represented within the confines of the text, marking her female specificity, in contrast with the other texts studied in this thesis. Despite this, thought and the self are intricately intertwined suggesting a forgetting of both in order to focus on the body, re-creating a dichotomy between the self and the body within the text. As Schaal has argued, a crude depiction of female desire is still within the paradigm of masculine discourse.<sup>279</sup>

Although Cooper argues for a queer reading of *Jouir* to encompass the non-male identified and scenarios with gay men, this is not enough to displace the masculine and to create a new form of female desire. Indeed, this is discussed in the text by the first-person narrator. One of the only other women introduced in the narrative is captured in the following fragment:

Une femme que je trouve belle, avec un profil d'Orientale et une voix d'une merveilleuse douceur, m'a dit, 'Toi qui es si libre et si intelligente, comment peux-tu avoir des fantasmes d'homme ? – Des fantasmes d'homme ?' j'ai demandé. 'Oui : le viol, la violence, tout ça, c'est un peu dépassé, c'est une vision mâle du désir, tu ne crois pas ?'<sup>280</sup>

Although Cooper reads this as an acknowledgement that is not fulfilled,<sup>281</sup> this is not the only time that Cusset ties into typical gender stereotypes in *Jouir*. Her first-person narrator and main character also engage in prostitution, although on the surface it is not presented as such. In a short fragment, a man buys the main character a drink and after

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<sup>276</sup> Erman, *Autofiction(s)*, p. 78.

<sup>277</sup> Cooper, p. 51.

<sup>278</sup> Cooper, p. 58.

<sup>279</sup> Michèle A. Schaal, 'Virginie Despentes or a French Third-Wave of Feminism?' in *Cherchez la femme: Women and Values in the Francophone World*, ed. by Erika Fülöp and Adrienne Angelo (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. 39–55 (p. 47).

<sup>280</sup> Cusset, *Jouir*, p. 37.

<sup>281</sup> Cooper, p. 52.



taking her to see the sea, they have a short sexual encounter described in very clinical and explicit terms. Cusset writes:

Je me suis allongée sur le dos, et j'ai écarté les jambes en pliant les genoux et en posant mes talons au bord du lit, dans la pose qu'on prend pour un examen gynécologique. Sa jambe plâtrée ne lui laissait guère de souplesse. Il est rentré en moi et il a joui très vite.<sup>282</sup>

The description of the sexual encounter is brief and the encounter appears to be in gratitude for the view of the sea. After the encounter, he leaves and nothing else of the incident is discussed. Although Cusset implicates the main character's body within the text, the body is de-eroticised and de-sexualised constituting an object rather than part of the subject. Cusset's use of explicit language coupled with clinical imagery increases the 'shock value' of a private life exposed to the public gaze. As Jordan writes,

What must be recognised about the majority of women's new writings of the sexual body, however, is that they are not intended to be arousing to the reader and they are distinguished from erotic literature by the clinical explicitness of their observation. Indeed, they frequently adopt an anatomical or physiological perspective on the minutiae of bodily processes. They also play with phallogentric constructions of female sexuality and seek to undermine male-authored scripts for male pleasure.<sup>283</sup>

Jordan's argument that clinical explicitness has displaced erotic literature in some women's writing about the sexual body can be seen in *Jouir*, and specifically in the example above. Despite this move away from erotic literature, the playfulness of undermining phallogentric constructions is not seen in *Jouir* due to the continuing gender stereotypes used in the text. Instead, the fragmentation at work in *Jouir* complicates the use of gender stereotypes and creates a new form of text.

My own definition for autofiction which features the importance of language play is partly satisfied through the fragmented construction of *Jouir*. Each fragment recalls another memory, yet there is no sense of linear narrative progression as can be imputed from the paratextual information on the back cover. This is in stark contrast to Cusset's more fictional texts such as *La blouse roumaine*, published in 1990, which discussed a female character's difficulties with her mother-in-law that usually feature a more conventional narrative structure with a linear plot. The fragmentation style in *Jouir* adds to a sense of stagnation that pervades the text. Although the main character

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<sup>282</sup> Cusset, *Jouir*, p. 21.

<sup>283</sup> Jordan, 'Close-up and Impersonal', p. 11.

moves from one sexual encounter with a man to the next, theoretically implying progression, the text in fact simply uses different methods to describe a sexual encounter. Very little character development is possible due to the lack of information available to the reader. As Jordan writes:

This new cataloguing instinct – exemplified most notably by Catherine Cusset's *Jouir* and Millet's *La Vie Sexuelle de Catherine M.* – involves women writers adopting the anonymity and interchangeability of bodies and the fast turn-over of 'text' which characterise male-authored pornography. Whether they do so with consistent and parodic intent is unclear, but descriptions of sex are often distinctly marked by the stimulating and liberating injection of humour.<sup>284</sup>

Of course, this 'cataloguing instinct' does give the male characters ways to differentiate themselves, yet no depth is given to the characters. For example, Cusset's descriptions of I and Y (the two most prominent designations in the text), are often compared. She writes:

À la fin du dîner, vendredi il y a trois semaines, I. et moi ne parlions plus ensemble, comme si nous avions épuisé les sujets de conversation. Au moment de partir, quand je l'ai embrassé sur les joues, à la française, j'ai senti le tressaillement de sa joue. Je me suis aussitôt rappelé le tremblement de la joue d'Y. sept ans et demi plus tôt, quand il avait quitté la fête où je l'avais rencontré.<sup>285</sup>

Despite the difference outlined by the first-person narrator between her two male lovers, the disparity is clearly not enough for character development. The description of *Jouir* as a catalogue serves well here, as the small descriptions give enough detail for the characters to be shown, but not enough to have distinguishing characteristics. The first-person narrator, on the other hand, remarks that there are moments when she can learn from 'Y', although each time this is stated, statements consists of one fragment underlining the very small progression made, and stagnation is the overwhelming issue holding the fragments together. For example, Cusset remarks in a fragment on its own, '[d]Y. j'ai appris que les hommes n'étaient ni des biens de consommation ni des remparts contre la peur'.<sup>286</sup> Despite the appearance of character development, this is undermined by the text itself. In addition, the fragments reveal the work to be episodic rather than progressive and the construction of relatively short sentences with little

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<sup>284</sup> Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p. 55.

<sup>285</sup> Cusset, *Jouir*, p. 32.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

variation augments the impression of a re-telling, rather than of a novel. There is only one other occasion when progression appears to play a role in the text and it does involve the character, Y. Cusset writes, '[p]ar Y. j'ai compris l'erreur où j'avais vécu'.<sup>287</sup> This fragment is placed on its own and is not explained or even elaborated upon. Neither the preceding fragment, nor the one succeeding it, give any clues as to either the nature of the mistake or whether the mistake has ever been rectified. The episodic nature of *Jouir* marks a turning point in Cusset's work in the use of fragmentation; and this turning point is emphasised when Cusset incorporates both English and Italian into the text, further destabilising it. This also marks a direct parallel with Doubrovsky's work, mirroring both fragmentation and the use of more than one language. Cusset's relationship with English is ever-present and there is an instance in the text when she uses that language to express her main character's most intimate moment. Cusset writes:

Il l'a dit dans une langue étrangère : « Your smell arouses me. » [...] Il a ajouté : « Your smell, I don't mean your perfume or your soap, no, the smell of your body. » Ce qu'il y a en moi de plus intime et de moins contrôlable : mon odeur.<sup>288</sup>

Both the use of English, as well as the difference in perspective helps to create a separate language, and English therefore becomes a default mode for the private life, giving privacy a different dimension due to the reader. Readers may be unable to access the precise wording of the phrase, creating a new private sphere within the public domain. Furthermore, the unnamed male then objectifies the main character through her smell. Cusset writes, '[i]l ne prêtait alors plus attention à mes paroles comme je le croyais alors mais à mon odeur'.<sup>289</sup> She is therefore objectified through her private sphere, rendering the sphere porous to outside influence and undermining the private sphere. In a further example, Cusset does not resist objectification. She writes:

Quand on sort des toilettes où on en a profité pour se remettre un peu de rouge à lèvres et se brosser les cheveux, l'homme a déjà signé le reçu de sa carte de crédit, il est en train d'enfiler son imperméable et il sort, soit en se retournant, soit sans se retourner.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., pp. 29–30.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>290</sup> Cusset, *Jouir*, p. 18.

This tension between the private and public in *Jouir* is emblematic more generally of autofiction, and yet renders the main character in *Jouir* subject to objectification despite the first-person narration. The presumed inclusiveness of the reader and first-person narrator is undermined by the only other woman discussed in the text<sup>291</sup> as seen earlier in this chapter. She creates a distance between the first-person narrator and the ‘on’ which this quote exemplifies. Jordan suggests further that an unnamed narrator can be isolated from other women<sup>292</sup> and I would argue that in *Jouir*, Cusset creates a narrative in which both the female and male characters are objectified.

## Conclusion

Gill Rye writes, a propos of Angot’s texts:

In precisely addressing, forestalling and countering the way readers (the public and the critics) interpret and attempt to categorize her work, Angot’s texts work, on the one hand, to diffuse, and even to neutralize those very criticisms and classifications, and, on the other, to engage her readers, to turn them back on themselves, thus resisting reductive readings, and urging them to think again, and again...<sup>293</sup>

In much the same way, Catherine Cusset’s texts seek to disrupt and resist classification, particularly through her autofictional persona. Her œuvre constitutes an interesting case study in the ways that texts are read for genre conventions and deviations from the rules. She has written a variety of texts, playing with the boundaries of autofiction, fiction, autobiography and life-writing, using different genre conventions in order to distort and transgress. The dual reading system emphasised in this chapter works to create different levels of meaning defying attempts to create a ‘reductive meaning’ as Rye suggests that, ‘uncertainty functions to resist narrative closure’.<sup>294</sup> Paratextual information in Cusset’s œuvre can therefore be seen as one of the key indicators, creating a paradoxical situation where doubt and transgression prevail in the narrative as to the character’s identity, creating an autofictional work predicated on doubt. *New York, journal d’un cycle*, in particular, represents a new initiative for Cusset through the use of English and a fragmented narrative structure, whilst also using images in her

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>292</sup> Jordan, *Contemporary French Women’s Writing*, p. 56.

<sup>293</sup> Rye, Gill, “‘Il faut que le lecteur soit dans le doute’: Christine Angot’s Literature of Uncertainty”, *Dalhousie French Studies*, 68 (2004), pp. 117–126, (p. 120).

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

work. Through the use of images, therefore, Cusset's text seeks to disrupt and places the body in a participatory context, destabilising her body's position within the text but stabilising the autofictional endeavour yielding an uncertain text.

Cusset's depiction of motherhood in *New York journal d'un cycle*, and her ground-breaking text, *Jouir*, both contribute towards a greater understanding of the use of gender stereotypes in her texts. Motherhood represents a complex dynamic within her œuvre, remoulding stereotypes and creating an odd dichotomy within it between the performance of motherhood and explicitness in *Jouir* which does indeed conform to masculine discourse. Autofiction's premise of playing with language, therefore, is not entirely concluded, but it is significantly advanced through playing with stereotypes. Furthermore, as Duncan writes:

The private *as an ideal type*, has traditionally been associated and conflated with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property the 'shadowy interior of the household', personal life, intimacy, passion, sexuality, 'the good life,' care, a haven, unwaged labour, reproduction and immanence. The public *as an ideal type* has traditionally been the domain of the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, critical public discourse, citizenship, civil society, justice, the market place, waged labour, production, the polis, the state, action, militarism, heroism and transcendence.<sup>295</sup>

The private spheres as marked by Duncan are precisely those categories that Cusset discusses in her texts. As these spheres are now discussed, Cusset is breaking new ground and creating autofiction's infamous 'langage d'une aventure'. Indeed, Cusset's performance of femininity through motherhood in her autofictional texts create a space for female specificity, whilst rejecting the body. On the other hand, Cusset's rejection of the body through the cataloguing instinct separates the body from the subject. Cusset's autofictional œuvre thus creates an odd dichotomy between carving a space for female specificity, and use of the masculine discourse in *Jouir*.

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<sup>295</sup> Duncan, 'Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces', p. 128.

## Chapter 2: Melding Theory and Practice in the Autofictional Works of Philippe Vilain

From the very beginning of Philippe Vilain's introduction to the autofictional world as a character in Annie Ernaux's text, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.', his character has caused controversy. As both an autofictional theorist and as a writer of autofiction, Vilain has inserted himself into every aspect of the genre. His literary career began with the publication of *L'Étreinte*<sup>296</sup> in 1997; an exploration of his relationship with Annie Ernaux and an indication of the style of texts that would subsequently appear. He continues to publish today, and has produced more than eight autofictional texts as well as participating in autofictional theory, having written several theoretical texts as well as interviews and articles, the most noteworthy of these being *Défense de Narcisse* in 2005. This chapter will examine both Vilain's autofictional theory as well as his autofictional texts in order to analyse Vilain's autofictional construction.

Melding theory and practice of autofiction, Philippe Vilain represents an unusual subset of autofictional writing. His autofictional persona is woven through both types of text, and merits investigation to discover the construction of the persona in relation to his autofictional theory. Autofiction's construction depends partly on the construction of the autofictional persona, central to my discussion of autofiction. Throughout this chapter, I will analyse Vilain's response to autofiction and its development, as well as the performance of his autofictional character. Vilain's texts often revolve around the discussion of a relationship with its subsequent breakdown, and this thesis will also discuss the interaction between the first-person narrator and the other characters in an attempt to elucidate the structures underpinning his texts. Vilain's autofictional persona is heavily rooted in the ability of the persona to create an autofictional body, particularly one that is performed through the text. Vilain's preoccupation with the objectified ideal of the female body is extensively discussed in this chapter in order to contrast his performance with his own autofictional persona.

The body of his autofictional persona is crucial to Philippe Vilain's autofictional success. Throughout this chapter it will be argued that Vilain's lack of discussion surrounding his autofictional body points to the creation of a new autofictional body;

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<sup>296</sup> Philippe Vilain, *L'Étreinte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

one that can be seen as the body of texts that house his persona. To this end, the body becomes a critical site of interrogation and an important factor in the ability of autofiction to distinguish itself from both autobiography and fiction.

In the construction of an autofictional genre, discrete factors have become apparent including the ludic capacity of autofiction. Philippe Vilain uses this capacity for ludic autofiction through language, and through the interconnected nature of his texts. Each text is constructed in relation to the others, providing a tight understanding of his œuvre and creating an autofictional persona that is enhanced through each subsequent text. As will be seen in this chapter, instability in Vilain's autofiction is a direct result of the contradictions in the autofictional persona wherein the clash between referential information and fiction becomes ever more visible. In this chapter, Vilain's autofiction will be seen as a contested site in which the autofictional persona is the crux of his autofictional production, creating an unstable autofictional œuvre.

## Vilain's theoretical framework

Philippe Vilain is an autofictional character, a producer and a critic of autofiction and his texts begin from a position of fiction, transgressed by the insertion of a first-person narrator and interspersed with references to writing and reflections upon the self, further transgressing the notion of fiction. Many of the features within his autofictional texts take their cues from the Doubrovskian tradition of autofiction. One of these features is the use of fictional markers on his texts such as the subtitle '*roman*' on the front cover of his texts. This marker has long been heralded as a feature of autofiction, and begins to create a horizon of expectation on the part of the reader, that the text to follow will be fiction. Vilain's use of other Doubrovskian markers of autofiction, include his various definitions and assumptions which were originally demonstrated in *Fils*.

Philippe Vilain has written three theoretical texts dealing with autofiction amongst various articles, conference papers and interviews, the most influential of which is *Défense de Narcisse*.<sup>297</sup> *Défense de Narcisse* sets out Vilain's theoretical

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<sup>297</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*. There are two more theoretical texts at the time of writing – Philippe Vilain, *Dans le séjour des corps : Essai sur Marguerite Duras* (Chatou: Transparence, 2010); and Philippe Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie : Suivi de deux entretiens avec Philippe Sollers & Philippe Lejeune* (Chatou: Éditions de la Transparence, 2009), as well as two further semi-theoretical texts: Philippe Vilain, *Confession d'un timide* (Paris: Grasset, 2010) and Philippe Vilain, *Éloge de l'arrogance* (Monaco: Rocher, 2012).

approach to autofiction, as well as defending the genre from accusations of narcissism. Vilain also seeks to create autofiction within a longer lineage of autobiography and fiction, attempting to undertake rehabilitation of autobiography to further justify autofiction. In *Défense de Narcisse*, Vilain gives several variations of definitions for autofiction, one of which is as follows:

La veine autofictionnelle me permettait, dans un geste émancipateur, de réécrire l'histoire, de donner une version romancée, plus ou moins fantasmée, de la relation – cela en jouant sur une ambiguïté romanesque : en effet, je savais très bien que, même en ne racontant pas exactement la vérité, les lecteurs auraient la naïveté de croire que tous ces événements m'étaient réellement arrivés, puisque j'évoquais une personne réelle.<sup>298</sup>

In this section, Vilain is paying particular attention to *L'Étreinte*, his first autofictional text published in 1997, mentioned earlier, which discusses the stages of a relationship and ends in its dissolution. In suggesting that he is playing with the horizon of expectation experienced by the reader in relation to *L'Étreinte*, Vilain is creating an atmosphere of condescension towards his readership. He is also decrying responsibility for any of the events that happened by using a pronominal verb construct, suggesting that they are not within his control as an author. The ambiguities shown by fictional events with a referential character display the inherent tension found in autofiction, as oscillation between referential and fictional statements create a sense of generic indecision. His comment in *Défense de Narcisse* is specific to *L'Étreinte*, but the oscillation experienced in this text is transferrable to all of his texts and so create his specific autofictional persona. As previously discussed, his autofictional texts include the subtitle '*roman*' on the front cover, creating the expectation of a fictional text to follow which is reinforced by Vilain's style of writing. Vilain's use of fictional indices is contrasted with his use of referential features, such as the performance of his autofictional persona as well as his use of recognisably referential places.

Vilain's autofictional persona throughout his works is revealed to be partly constructed through traditional referential information. He repeats character traits over and over such as a disdain for women and repeatedly describing places such as Rouen or Paris in order to create the impression of referentiality. For instance, the first sentence of *L'Étreinte* begins with, '[h]ier, nous avons visité le musée Flaubert et d'Histoire de la

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<sup>298</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 58.



médecine situé dans un pavillon de l'hôtel-Dieu de Rouen'.<sup>299</sup> With the insertion of verifiable buildings within a known city, Vilain creates the impression of referentiality and situates the reader instantly within Rouen. With every subsequent addition of referential statements, Vilain adds to this impression, creating this oscillation between referentiality and fictionality. His stable and coherent character creates a link between all of his texts, through which different events can be narrated and conceived. Interestingly, his word choice reveals this to be a freeing gesture that he can use, 'dans un geste émancipateur',<sup>300</sup> presumably freeing Vilain from the necessity of constraint from fiction or from autobiography. Although these constraints have been lifted by virtue of being situated within autofiction, Vilain immediately imposes new constraints and constructions through his definition of autofiction and discussions with Doubrovsky's definition. Vilain's concept of a freeing gesture is not, in fact, free at all. The character he has created in his texts does not change radically from the vision of a stable and coherent fictional or autobiographical character in a linear chronology of events in autobiography or the novel. Instead, his innovation in autofiction is through loosening binary structures which traditionally hold the dichotomy of autobiography and fiction together, contributing to a sense of instability in his texts. Paradoxically, as Vilain beings to create his freeing gesture from autobiographical and fictional constraints, he has created new constraints within autofiction and within his particular definition of autofiction. Yet this is not to say that the autofictional persona created by Lejeune is the one experienced by the author. As Schmitt writes, 'L'équation auctoriale par excellence, que doit résoudre le lecteur, se présente ainsi : l'auteur est à la fois *absent* et *présent* dans son texte.'<sup>301</sup> The body that is created by the reader is individually constructed by the reader as it is performed in the text. The referential information, given by Vilain, helps to anchor the text to the real as does his evocation of a 'personne réelle',<sup>302</sup> yet this his construction is presumed to have elements of fiction within it. Vilain's explicit summons of the reader is no accident. The reader is critical to the autofictional project, whilst being denigrated.

One of the ways that Vilain seeks to evade the autobiographical novel is through his character construction, which typically uses aspects of Lejeune's autobiographical construct. Under Lejeune's autobiographical contract, autobiography can be determined

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<sup>299</sup> Vilain, *L'Étreinte*, p. 11.

<sup>300</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 58.

<sup>301</sup> Schmitt, *Je reel, je fictif*, p. 151.

<sup>302</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 58.

using two different conditions, either implicitly or explicitly. Implicitly, the autobiographical character can be constructed through ‘l’emploi de *titres* ne laissant aucun doute sur le fait que la première personne renvoie au nom de l’auteur’<sup>303</sup> or through a ‘*section initiale* du texte où le narrateur prend des engagements vis-à-vis du lecteur’.<sup>304</sup> All three aspects of the persona including the narrator, character and author must therefore use the same name.<sup>305</sup> Furthermore, this name appears on the paratextual information and is associated with all three different entities in all sections of the text.

Lejeune’s conception of the pact structure in autobiography typically creates an understanding of the function of the reader in autobiography. In Lejeune’s theorization of the pact, both author and reader hold power in order for the autobiography to be read as such. As Sheringham writes:

If, following Lejeune, we choose to envisage autobiography as a contractual activity, it is important that we interpret this not only in terms of the attempt to cordon off an area in which certain general protocols of reading will apply, but as a recognition that the constant attempt to bargain, to negotiate, to engage with us is a predominant feature of the genre.<sup>306</sup>

Indeed as Rye writes, with regard to Angot, ‘readers are required to be both active and interactive, the uncertainty about what it is they are reading keeping them on their guard and never allowing a comfortable, secure, or passively uninvolved reading position’<sup>307</sup>. An active reader-author relationship is thus codified into the genre. Yet the pact system that Lejeune employs, according to Boyle, subsumes both reader and autobiographer into the system of autobiography and gives the reader possession of the ability to enforce the autobiographical pact. Boyle writes:

Yet the more profound implication of Lejeune’s conceptualization of the genre of autobiography is that the reader’s role is to take up their place in an overarching framework which intangibly drives the way the autobiographical self is written, read and understood: a framework which accords the reader a position of power *vis-à-vis* the autobiographer, at the expense of the latter’s autonomy over their own self; a framework which consumes the autobiographer’s self.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 27.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>306</sup> Sheringham, *French Autobiography*, p. 142.

<sup>307</sup> Rye, ‘Il faut que le lecteur soit dans le doute: Christine Angot’s literature of uncertainty’, p. 119.

<sup>308</sup> Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France*, p. 21.

Boyle articulates the profound unease that is at the centre of relations between the author and reader in autobiography and the power struggle that is at the heart of reader relation in autobiography. The pact system within autofiction is also subject to the same unease, particularly given its use of both autobiographical and fictional pacts as envisaged by Schmitt.<sup>309</sup> In Vilain's case, the unease produced by his autofictional persona is enhanced through the uncertain pact system employed by autofiction.

Vilain's autofictional construct is not dissimilar to that of an autobiographical entity, although he does not usually use a name for his main character. His autofictional utterance therefore is constructed through the use of the first person narrator, present throughout his texts and through his use of paratextual information such as his relationship with Annie Ernaux. Although his main character may develop greater or lesser dependence on the first-person narrator and author, lending nuance to his depiction of his autofictional persona, they are always intertwined.

Vilain's autofictional theory is extended in his text, *L'autofiction en théorie*, published in 2009 and suggests a sense of distance from his readers, despite their necessity within autofiction. His text elaborates on his own theory of autofiction and the ways in which it functions in his own texts. He writes, '[j]e me demande en effet si, d'une certaine façon, l'autofiction n'est pas une tentative plus subtile pour rendre mon "moi" énigmatique ou, du moins, difficilement lisible, et non pour l'exhiber comme le pensent souvent les lecteurs'.<sup>310</sup> In effect, Vilain's use of autofiction is a way for him to hide his private self rather than revealing it. At the same time, this suggests a level of fictionalisation that is inconsistent with his definitions of autofiction. As his private self becomes more concealed, the degree to which his construct can access referentiality diminishes, reducing oscillation between the referential and fiction. A reduction in oscillation between the two paradoxically creates a stabilising influence upon autofiction. This potential stability, however, eliminates autofiction, and produces texts within the autobiographical novel continuum. Despite Vilain's concept of autofiction with an almost hidden persona, he seems to imply differently later in *L'autofiction en théorie*. He writes:

Là réside tout l'intérêt de l'autofiction, il me semble, non dans l'action d'anticiper ou de prophétiser les événements, bien entendu, mais dans le fait de se fabuler, d'extrapoler à la première personne son vécu et de

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<sup>309</sup> Schmitt, *Je réel/ je fictif*, p. 56.

<sup>310</sup> Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 29.

considérer cette extrapolation comme étant pleinement constitutive du moi ; notre imaginaire, les fabulations que nous nous autorisons, exprimant tout autant, même peut-être mieux, ce que nous sommes et s'affirmant comme l'expansion nécessaire, la dépendance intime de notre moi. Ainsi la littérature d'autofiction ne participe-t-elle pas d'une falsification, mais, au contraire, d'un dévoilement du moi appréhendé dans toutes ses dimensions, et notamment dans le rapport particulier, fictionnel, que ce moi entretient avec une vérité littérale, factuelle et événementielle.<sup>311</sup>

Vilain's conception of autofiction thus entails a construction of an autofictional persona that exists tangentially to that of the author. Indeed, despite his argument earlier that autofiction might provide a hidden space for his construction, his theoretical position now appears to be that his autofictional production creates a more open self. Vilain's use of 'dévoilement' here to construct a more revealing portrait of his persona is at odds with his hidden self. His depiction of the main character gives nuance to the autofictional persona crucial to the autofictional project. Although he can be seen as transgressing the boundaries of autofiction, his autofictional persona is still deeply tied into the authorial construct mitigating the transgression. Within the construct of his autofictional persona, therefore, Vilain is playing with the bounds of that persona. His ludic representation of the autofictional persona, can therefore be seen as part of autofiction's dependence on play and games as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis. Yet his autofictional stance can perhaps best be seen when seen in the context of his texts rather than his theoretical positions.

In 2003, Philippe Vilain published a text entitled *L'été à Dresde* which discussed his relationship with a former model named Élisabeth. It becomes clear within the course of the text that Élisabeth is dying of cancer, although she tries to hide this from the protagonist, and the main character moves to Germany in order to see her. *L'été à Dresde* is narrated by a first-person narrator, as are all of his texts, connecting the main character and narrator. Much stronger indication is given in the text, however, that the two entities of main character and narrator are part of the same overarching entity. In *L'été à Dresde*, Élisabeth is referred to as the future Mme Vilain. Vilain writes on two occasions in the same text:

Je croyais l'embêter en l'appelant 'Mme Vilain', mais, à mon regret, elle n'en paraissait pas mécontente.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 38.

<sup>312</sup> Philippe Vilain, *L'été à Dresde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 58.

Ce nom l'enlaidissait, affadissait son doux prénom, et surtout, cela me faisait drôle de parler d'une 'Mme Vilain' qui fût une autre femme que ma mère.<sup>313</sup>

It is important to note that each time his lover is referred to as Mme Vilain the moniker is written between quotation marks, suggestive of doubt regarding the authenticity of such a name. Despite the quotation marks, however, the main character is quite clearly linked to the first-person narrator as well as to the author, tying all three parts of the entity together. Through linking these aspects together in *L'été à Dresde*, Vilain also creates links between different texts as he often refers to other texts within the corpus when publishing new texts, creating one large intertext between them all. In particular, his definition of truth appears flexible and at odds with his re-imagining of his character. The extent to which Vilain is an unreliable author is naturally impossible to verify (the reader cannot know for sure which parts of the character are like the author) but it is clear that his character and author are certainly linked in his texts. Of course, the role imagination plays cannot be understated here, and neither can the understanding of truth which Vilain is using. The insistence upon the relationship between character, narrator and author creates a paradoxical self, as Vilain's autofictional character also requires imagination to play a role, in order for the relationship to work.

Vilain uses more than one definition of autofiction and his most simple and pithy definition is as follows: '[m]on pacte définitoire : "Fiction homonymique ou anominale qu'un individu fait de sa vie ou d'une partie de celle-ci."' <sup>314</sup> In comparison with Doubrovsky's intervention in autofiction, Philippe Vilain's discussion of autofiction places more emphasis on the possibilities of fiction when used in conjunction with an individual's life. Doubrovsky's definition, whilst beginning with fiction's possibilities, moves on to depend more on ludic innovation in language. Vilain's definition is couched in the language of Lejeune's famous autobiographical pact and indeed flows naturally from it. The emphasis on fiction also helps to invoke the role of imagination rather than that of referentiality, yet the main autofictional persona is still crucial to the development of his autofiction.

Ludic representations are a crucial aspect of autofiction and playful language can be particularly important. In Doubrovsky's *Fils*, three languages are used, incorporating them into the text. In the previous chapter dealing with Cusset's autofictional œuvre, the

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>314</sup> Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 72.

two languages of English and French are used. Autofictional personae are critical in establishing the ludic qualities of autofictional writing as they underpin the very existence of the genre. Through the autofictional persona, the author performs the qualities that reveal autofiction as a genre, giving the languages used by the personae a ludic function.

In *Faux-père*, published in 2008, Vilain uses Italian to disrupt the traditional syntax of the novel and occlude meaning. *Faux-père* is a text devoted to the relationship between the first-person narrator and an Italian woman named Stefania, first introduced to Vilain's corpus in *Paris l'après-midi*. *Faux-père* revolves around the protagonist's relationship with Stefania and the difficulties he experiences when Stefania discovers she is pregnant, eventually ending in the termination of the pregnancy. Throughout *Faux-père*, there are instances of Italian spoken from Stefania to the male first-person narrator which are not translated. This lack of translation creates a tension between the author and reader, alienating the reader from the text. It is significant that the one who disrupts the order and narrative of the text is the female character who has introduced doubt and instability into the narrative. This instability is resolved at the end of the text as the male character asserts his will over her choice, and she undergoes an abortion. Thus, whilst Vilain has used languages to express ludic representations of autofiction in one text, this cannot be said to be a feature of his œuvre. Instead, Vilain uses his autofictional persona to create ludic representations in autofiction, creating instability in his texts. This can be most clearly seen through his relationship with Annie Ernaux, and the ways in which she has created his autofictional persona, and to some extent infiltrated his texts.

## Vilain and Ernaux

Autofiction has often revolved around the idea of intertextuality, with Chloé Delaume in this thesis being the most active in using different texts. Isabelle Grell has even gone so far as to say that, '[u]n des traits typiques de l'autofiction est l'intertextualité'.<sup>315</sup> Intertextuality, as well as a typical trait of autofiction, can also be seen as a ludic strategy within autofiction. Philippe Vilain's entry into autofiction is quite unusual as he was first introduced as a character in another writer's texts. Annie Ernaux is a now

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<sup>315</sup> Isabelle Grell, 'Amélie Nothomb, Calixthe Beyala et Nina Bouraoui', 2 February 2009, <<http://www.autofiction.org/index.php?post/2009/02/02/Amelie-Nothomb-Calixthe-Beyala-et-Nina-Bouraoui>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

retired literature teacher and an established writer, publishing auto-ethnographic texts since 1974 with the appearance of *Les armoires vides*. Ernaux and Vilain entered into a relationship after he wrote to her, and he was written into a short text as a character which was entitled, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.' in 1996 in *L'Infini*.<sup>316</sup> 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.' discusses the meeting and beginnings of a relationship between Philippe V. and Ernaux as well as their first sexual encounter in two short pages. His character, explicitly introduced by a well-known female writer to autofiction in this short two page fragment is not elaborated upon. Vilain is simply an object and he has no identifying qualities other than the fact that he is a student. Furthermore, the only place his name is mentioned is in the title, and the subject pronoun 'he' is only used nine times in comparison with twenty-five uses of the subject pronoun 'I'. In addition, all active verbs but one in the fragment are constructed with either 'I' or 'we' rendering Vilain's position in the text to be simply object. His first foray into autofiction is thus as another writer's construct. Vilain's extra-textual relationship with Annie Ernaux can be considered to be part of a ludic strategy with his autofictional persona.

As their relationship developed, Ernaux dedicated some of her works to him, such as *La honte* and also wrote about him as 'W.' in her autobiographical text, *L'occupation* published in 2002 as mentioned previously. *L'occupation*<sup>317</sup> discusses the impact a new lover in the life of 'W.' has upon her, and the ways that she seeks to understand her new role in his life. In *L'occupation*, however, it is more important for Ernaux to understand the new partner of W., rather than the male character himself. Despite this, he is included in the text, and creates links between her œuvre and his own, forging an intertextual space. His autofictional persona is critical in this creation of an intertextual space. The space can be seen as both a bridge between the œuvres and a facility for each author to exert dominance over their relationship narrative. Both Vilain and Ernaux have created a ludic space in which the reader of either text is a participant in the relationship. This mutual ludic space utilizes the unease surrounding the power relations between reader and author, depending on the author that is being read.

Ernaux and Vilain's relationship has been carried further in their writing as Vilain has echoed almost exactly some of the phrases in Ernaux's writing about him in,

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<sup>316</sup> Ernaux, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.'

<sup>317</sup> Ernaux, *L'occupation*.

‘Fragments autour de Philippe V.’ in a similar way to *L’Étreinte*.<sup>318</sup> *L’Étreinte* recounts the relationship between Annie Ernaux and Philippe Vilain (which existed at the time of writing *L’Étreinte*) with a fictional ending and was published in 1997. As an autofictional character, Vilain has broken the usual constraints of fiction and turned into a producer of autofiction. In *L’Étreinte*, the narration is held together with snippets of verifiable information such as the places they visit in Rouen and previously known information about Annie Ernaux. The latter is described throughout as ‘A.E.’<sup>319</sup> and she is identified as the author of *Passion simple*,<sup>320</sup> a key text within *L’Étreinte*. *Passion Simple* describes the love and passion that the first-person narrator has for her married lover, a foreign businessman, designated only by ‘A’. Through the introduction of ‘A.E.’ as well as recognisable features from Rouen, these referential indices help to give the impression of referentiality. As seen in the previous chapter, the text’s readers are also divided into those who are cognisant and non-cognisant readers,<sup>321</sup> giving those who recognise Vilain from Annie Ernaux’s texts a recognisably referential sphere. This text as well as the references to Ernaux throughout *L’Étreinte* give the text its autofictional status in conjunction with the character construction.

In *L’Étreinte*, *Passion simple* is described as the catalyst between Ernaux and Vilain. The text is presented as the pretext for their correspondence to begin, and serves to create their relationship through literature. This relationship is continued through literature throughout *L’Étreinte*, and it is used by Vilain as a way to get through to Ernaux. He writes that, ‘[j]’étais fier d’avoir atteint à la fois l’écrivain par mes mots et d’avoir pénétré l’intimité d’une femme que je devinais submergée de sollicitations masculines’.<sup>322</sup> The explicit sexual imagery with, ‘pénétré l’intimité d’une femme,’ creates a dominant picture of Vilain’s persona, subjugating the female character. Furthermore, as Vilain remarks at the end of the text:

L’écriture est une menace dirigée à la fois contre elle et contre moi. En écrivant sur le coup de notre séparation, je nous ai remis en vie, j’ai jeté

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<sup>318</sup> Kasia Wlos-Krajewska, ‘L’image des hommes dans l’écriture d’Annie Ernaux’ (presented at the Research in Linguistics, Literature and Translation Conference, Glendon College, Toronto, 2007) <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/50170272/Kasia-Wlos-Krajewska>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>319</sup> Vilain, *L’Étreinte*, pp. 11, 13, 17, 22.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>321</sup> Shen and Xu, p. 47.

<sup>322</sup> Vilain, *L’Étreinte*, p. 19.



nos deux personnages dans une arène où, il me semblait, l'un devrait tuer,  
l'autre mourir.<sup>323</sup>

Yet his text is also a way to both penetrate her and to kill her. The contrast between the two states described by Vilain is also marked. At the beginning of the text, Vilain dominates the female character, yet at the end of the text, his persona appears to briefly re-inscribe her agency into the text. His next task is to subjugate her again, by 'killing her' and leaving her. Vilain has asserted his agency in the relationship despite, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.' preceding *L'Étreinte*. In the mutual ludic space created by Ernaux and Vilain, Vilain's autofictional persona attempts to take control of the relationship and by extension the narrative.

Nor is this the only time that writing and relationships are tied together in this text. Vilain also uses literature in order to create a new type of imagination. He writes, '[e]n moi-même, je ne souhaitais pas aller plus loin, je ne voulais pas dépasser les limites de mon imagination, les frontières de mon propre corps'.<sup>324</sup> His imagination and his body are therefore intimately linked together, and demonstrate the capabilities of his literature. Vilain's autofictional performance is bound by the parameters of the body constructed by his readership. His unique situation as an autofictional character in Ernaux's works is complicated by his declarations in *Dans le séjour des corps : Un essai sur Marguerite Duras*, published in 2010. Vilain discusses Duras' work and relates her work to his own, remarking that he had previously thought of himself as a Durassian character. He writes, '[l]ongtemps je me crus moi-même un personnage de Duras'.<sup>325</sup> Vilain's loss of agency in this statement can be contrasted with his reassertion of agency in his written relationship with Ernaux. Due to his status as a character in the works of Ernaux, he has remoulded his autofictional persona in an attempt to deny Ernaux agency in his re-telling of their relationship in *L'Étreinte*.

I have used 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.' as the counterpart or hypertext<sup>326</sup> to *L'Étreinte* and as such it provides an avenue to directly understand the nature of Philippe Vilain's autofiction. The episode recounted in 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.' and repeated in *L'Étreinte* has two different focusses with Ernaux concentrating on the mixing of menstrual blood and sperm, and Vilain who details Ernaux's body as an object. Crucially Ernaux is the primary agent in her reconstruction of the event. In her

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<sup>323</sup> Vilain, *L'Étreinte*, p. 111.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>325</sup> Philippe Vilain, *Dans le séjour des corps*, p. 14.

<sup>326</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 59.

discussion of the interaction, Ernaux's insistence on her own agency in '*jouissance*' marks the reversal of traditional coding of gender roles. She writes,

Le souvenir de ce geste, par-dessus tout, me remplissait de jouissance. J'ai pensé qu'il était de même nature que celui qui consiste à écrire la phrase inaugurale d'un livre. Qu'il supposait le même désir d'intervenir dans le monde, d'ouvrir une histoire. Et j'ai senti que, pour une femme, la liberté d'écrire sans honte passe par celle de toucher la première, avec désir, le corps d'un homme.<sup>327</sup>

As Thomas remarks in her translation notes, the switch to *jouissance* from satisfaction was a significant choice<sup>328</sup> and suggests that not only has Ernaux taken the initiative in her relationship, but that her pleasure in writing has also been enhanced by Vilain as an object of her desire. Vilain's relationship with writing and with Ernaux as shown earlier in *L'Étreinte* is replicated in Ernaux's text suggestive of a mirroring of approach to writing. Vilain corroborates with her reading of the interaction and subsequent relationship wherein her agency is unquestioned. In Vilain's reconstruction of the event, Ernaux is cast as the primary agent with him stating, '[d]ans mes hypothèses les plus folles, je n'avais attendu que ce moment où elle ferait les premiers pas'.<sup>329</sup> The agency of the first person narrator is asserted at the end of the text, however, with the imagined breakdown of the relationship. Vilain writes that, '[j]'ai rompu avec A.E. en janvier 1997'.<sup>330</sup> The normative gender roles are asserted and are continued through the rest of his texts.

Vilain uses his texts to link with others in his œuvre, creating one large space in which all the texts operate together. This referential and performative sphere intensified in *Pas son genre* which was published in 2011. *Pas son genre* examines the main character's relationship, François, with a hairdresser, Jennifer, as well as the subsequent breakdown of the affair. Although a name different from the author is used, the information given throughout the text lends credence to Vilain's character as a construction of himself. He is portrayed as a philosophy teacher, something already enunciated in previous texts, and the text is written in the first person. For the first time, Vilain also creates the semblance of chapters. Jennifer, the narrator's partner, is

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<sup>327</sup> Ernaux, 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.', p. 26.

<sup>328</sup> Annie Ernaux and Lyn Thomas, 'Fragments around Philippe V.', *Feminist Review*, 1999, 49–50, (p. 50).

<sup>329</sup> Vilain, *L'Étreinte*, p. 33.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

described by her job as a hairdresser,<sup>331</sup> and a division is created between his work as a teacher of a philosophy and hers. The protagonist, François, is also the first-person narrator who relates his relationship with Jennifer. Although *Pas son genre*'s main character is named François which would appear at first glance to preclude *Pas son genre* from joining Vilain's autofictional corpus, the first ten pages of the text tie Vilain to the first-person narrator and main character. This is the first time in Vilain's autofictional corpus that his male, heterosexual, first-person narrator has been identified as having a name; in all previous texts the male character has not been named at all and he is simply the first-person narrator. Further identification of *Pas son genre* as part of his autofictional writings comes from references to previous autofictional texts within *Pas son genre* itself, tying all of the texts together. These references all occur within the first ten pages of the book, used to establish his autofictional credentials and to tie all of his texts together in one over-arching section. The first ten pages act as a type of foreword to the text, linking *Pas son genre* with Doubrovsky's *Fils*. Through traditional coding of autofiction, Vilain is thus identifying the text as autofiction. He writes, '[u]ne femme est tombée en dépression parce que je ne me décidais pas, une autre a fini par me tromper, une autre encore, que j'avais mise enceinte, a avorté pour ne pas mettre au monde un orphelin'.<sup>332</sup> The incidents raised in this section have all been dealt with in different works by Vilain and help to bind the corpus together. The woman who fell into depression is encapsulated in *Paris l'après-midi*,<sup>333</sup> published in 2006 detailing his relationship with an older woman; the text with the woman who betrayed him is *L'Étreinte*,<sup>334</sup> published in 1997, discussing his relationship with Annie Ernaux and the last reference to the woman who aborted his child is *Faux-père*,<sup>335</sup> published in 2008 telling of his relationship with an Italian woman named Stefania. Of course, this implies a strong relationship between Philippe Vilain and his reader in order to understand the linking of each text to an autofictional corpus. The pact implied here also hinges upon an understanding of each text as present in the reader's mind and that the reader has read all previous texts. The text functions somewhat as an autofictional text in its own right through the first-person narrator, the subject matter discussed and the paratextual

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<sup>331</sup> Philippe Vilain, *Pas son genre* (Paris: Grasset, 2011), p. 20.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>333</sup> Philippe Vilain, *Paris l'après-midi* (Paris: Grasset, 2006).

<sup>334</sup> Vilain, *L'Étreinte*.

<sup>335</sup> Philippe Vilain, *Faux-père* (Paris: Grasset, 2008).

information given, and yet the link to autofiction is stronger once all of Vilain's texts have been taken into account.

Thus Vilain uses Ernaux as a type of reference, creating a ludic intertextual space between their texts. This space is then used in conjunction with other autofictional texts in his corpus to create one autofictional space in which all of his autofictional production can be understood. In this way, the foreword to *Pas son genre* can be seen as the culmination of his autofictional production. All of the texts in his corpus are tied together under one text, creating a more stable autofictional œuvre, and giving Vilain more leeway to challenge his autofictional persona through the name.

Vilain's ludic strategies continue with his autofictional persona throughout *L'Étreinte*. Vilain plays with the reader, addressing the reader directly in his texts, and has used his autofictional persona to confess his unreliability as a narrator. He writes:

Même si j'en ressens la nécessité en cet endroit du récit, j'aimerais ne jamais avoir à sortir de ce temps-là et ne pas révéler les circonstances de ma rencontre avec A.E. ; non tant par souci de préserver cette partie de notre intimité que par refus d'utiliser les procédés traditionnels du roman, où la scène de la rencontre apparaît comme une figure imposée, un moment fondateur du récit.<sup>336</sup>

Vilain's ludic strategy here is to provide the reader, through the medium of the autofictional persona, apparent direct access to the authorial presence. Vilain's use or apparent lack of traditional narrative strategy perpetuates the idea of the autofictional persona as a true likeness of the author. Yet by breaking the bounds of the text, Vilain also creates a situation in which he imposes his view of the relationship explicitly upon the reader. Discontented that he may be misunderstood if the reader is simply given access to his version of the meeting, he further dictates the terms under which the reader should read his excerpt. Finally, Vilain's narration does follow conventional narrative strategies, suggesting that this is a way for Vilain to impose a ludic strategy from the autofictional persona.

## **Ludic contradictions of narrative**

One of the central preoccupations in autofictional texts is writing, and specifically the process of writing autofictional texts creating a situation in which reader and author participate in a game of genre formation through instability. In this, Vilain's use of

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<sup>336</sup>Vilain, *L'Étreinte*, p. 20.

literature to penetrate Annie Ernaux symbolically, as discussed earlier, is part of this trend. This is not the only instance of writing in his texts, however, and part of Vilain's œuvre appears to be dedicated to establishing his dislike of fictional texts despite his evident uses of fiction. I will now discuss several of his texts in an attempt to view the contradictions he puts forward in his texts in contrast with his autofictional theory.

*Paris l'après-midi*, published in 2006 and which won the Prix François-Mauriac, discusses the narrator's failed relationship with a married woman and the character's ethical dilemmas with adultery. In *Paris l'après-midi*, Vilain seems to refute the idea of any fictional aspect to his works, decrying the very possibility that fiction could exist in his text. In fact, according to Vilain, a fictional rewriting of an experience would destroy the experience, which is in complete contrast to his original definitions included in *Défense de Narcisse*, and discussed earlier in this chapter. Vilain writes, '[s]urtout l'idée de revivre cette histoire, de retrouver par le souvenir l'impression du bonheur, ne m'exaspérait pas tant que celle de la détruire dans une transposition romanesque forcément factice'.<sup>337</sup> Vilain's aversion to 'destroying' the episode being discussed here through the use of fiction is surprising given his other texts and the debt he appears to feel for literature which enables him to relive relationships. The very act of writing in *Paris l'après-midi* and the text itself therefore appear paradoxical and contradictory.

This is not the only time that Vilain's use of literature within his texts appears contradictory. *L'été à Dresde*, which discusses a relationship with a model, is consistent with his attitude to fictionalisation that he demonstrated in *Paris l'après-midi*. The first-person narrator writes, '[c]et été-là, il y a déjà six mois, j'ai commencé d'écrire cette histoire, sans savoir encore que la littérature me permettrait d'affirmer ce que la vie nous refuserait'.<sup>338</sup> His text and literature appear to be ways of validating his life, not negating it as he is suggesting in *Paris l'après-midi*. Further, his fiction is allowing him to create something that life has refused, juxtaposing life and literature as two ends of the same scale. On the other hand, in *L'été à Dresde*, Vilain explains that his disgust in writing stems from the artificiality imposed by fiction. He writes:

Pourquoi faut-il que, de livre en livre, je m'acharne à raconter ma vie, pourquoi je répugne autant à transposer mes histoires en de véritables romans ? Sans doute parce que la fiction – que j'apprécie pourtant chez les autres – me paraît artificielle lorsqu'elle touche à ma propre histoire, sans doute aussi parce que la mémoire, en transformant à mon insu des

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<sup>337</sup> Vilain, *Paris l'après-midi*, p. 80.

<sup>338</sup> Vilain, *L'été à Dresde*, p. 123.

paroles et des souvenirs, en déplaçant certains lieux et certaines dates, *fictionne* à ma place l'histoire de ma vie.<sup>339</sup>

Vilain's autofictional persona, through accessing an extra-textual reality, appeals to the reader and to a wider network of his own texts. His persona is using the previous texts, as well as any texts that succeed this text, to create a platform. His suspicion of fiction is also noted, as in *L'Étreinte*. Vilain writes with regard to Ernaux, '[à] l'époque, il me semble que je partageais sa méfiance à l'égard de la fiction et de la littérature que je considérais comme une immense tricherie'.<sup>340</sup> Whilst interacting with the reader, Vilain's use of fictional narrative strategies undermines his pointed remark to the reader; this site of interaction is demonstrably false as only the reader can have final arbitration of the end product. Paradoxically, in *La dernière année* published in 1999 and chronicling Vilain's dying father's life, Vilain's supposed aversion to fiction and becoming a part of literature is again refuted with the acknowledgement that writing has enabled him to accompany his dying father. He writes: '[é]crire. J'ai besoin d'accompagner mon père encore un peu, de faire quelques pas avec lui, comme il nous accompagnait sur le parking de la clinique les dimanches en fin d'après-midi durant sa cure'.<sup>341</sup> In Vilain's case, this is due to the process of writing in which the act of writing itself is seen as fictional and displaces the truth of an encounter or relationship. Whilst suspicious of fiction in general, it is paradoxical that Vilain's remarks concerning autofiction use fiction as their basis. One of his founding definitions of the genre invokes, 'fiction homonymique ou anominale',<sup>342</sup> creating an oddly contradictory patchwork of theory. His contradictory attitude is further followed in *Le renoncement* which was published in 2001 and discusses Vilain's failed relationships with a number of women, amongst them a married woman, Catherine, who attempts suicide sometime after the end of their relationship. In *Le renoncement*, writing is a way for Vilain to try to retrieve that which was once lost, a way to rewrite reality. For Vilain therefore, through literature he can once again rewrite history. He writes, '[l]es circonstances de la vie nous ont séparés, il est improbable qu'elles nous réunissent un jour. L'écriture est un moyen de la retrouver'.<sup>343</sup> The problem with Vilain's assertion of his own work remains

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<sup>339</sup> Vilain, *L'été à Dresde*, p. 118.

<sup>340</sup> Vilain, *L'Étreinte*, p. 15.

<sup>341</sup> Philippe Vilain, *La dernière année* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), p. 89.

<sup>342</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 72.

<sup>343</sup> Philippe Vilain, *Le renoncement* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 13.

that it is inaccurate and contradictory when seen in the context of his other texts, rendering his theoretical basis somewhat unstable.

Autofiction is often criticised as a genre populated by narcissists who are only interested in their own activities.<sup>344</sup> Vilain himself has made a spirited defence of narcissistic tendencies in literature<sup>345</sup> and his work in seeking to justify autofiction through a dense body of theory as well as many autofictional works reveals his strong interest with the lineage of autofiction. The nature of Vilain's discourse can most easily be seen through the prism of his theoretical writings, wherein he writes of the history of autofiction as well as of his current understanding of the genre. Vilain gives an apparently objective view of autofiction in *Défense de Narcisse* as Vilain describes Doubrovsky's autofiction and how it is constructed. In further discussions about autofiction however, Vilain is keen to exclude those who do not fit in his construction of autofiction and he actively seeks to control the discourse surrounding autofiction. Those who do not conform to his ideal of autofiction are automatically rejected from participation. In particular, he seeks to exclude from 'mainstream' autofiction those who he deems unworthy such as Christine Angot, writing:

Ainsi, je n'ai pas du tout le sentiment de pratiquer la même littérature que Christine Angot, même si mes textes, écrits dans un style néoclassique, se réclament également de l'autofiction, et, à travers cette comparaison, je mets au défi n'importe quel lecteur de mesurer les importantes variations qui président au sein même du genre. Il faut le dire et le répéter : Angot ne représente pas l'autofiction, mais une marge de celle-ci. L'autofiction est victime d'un préjugé. On s'attarde sur quelques livres surmédiatisés qui ne sont pas représentatifs de la production d'ensemble.<sup>346</sup>

Vilain is taking the dominating position of critical theorist and in using the interesting formulation that Angot is at the 'margins of autofiction', Vilain is suggesting not only that there is a mainstream of autofiction but that one of the best-selling authors, certainly one of the most media-visible, and one of the names most readily synonymous with autofiction does not fit within it. Vilain uses his dominating position within autofictional theory to control the discourse, and to regulate other autofictional writers,

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<sup>344</sup> Arnaud Genon, 'A propos de "Sur autofiction : Pratiques et théories"', *La Revue des Ressources*, 12 April 2013, <<http://www.larevuedesressources.org/sur-autofiction-pratiques-et-theories-articles-bonnes-feuilles,2532.html>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>345</sup> Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 16.

<sup>346</sup> Philippe Vilain, 'L'autofiction, exception théorique', in *L'Exception et la France contemporaine : Histoire, imaginaire, littérature*, ed. by Marc Dambre, and Richard J. Golsan (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelles, 2010), pp. 161–168 (p. 165).

creating a hierarchical view of autofiction. The idea of autofiction having margins and suggesting that there is a mainstream of autofictional thought runs counter to the project of autofiction which is to subvert and challenge the prevalent discourses. Doubrovsky's initial intervention in autofiction was as a challenge to Lejeune's model of autobiography and fiction, an initial intervention that disrupted the binary status of literature and has given rise to a genre which seeks to subvert the systems of power at play. Vilain's own autofictional production seeks to challenge the constraints of both autobiography and fiction, rendering this position of control more difficult to accept uncritically.

Elements of control over narrative abound in Vilain's text, and echo the control Vilain has over the reader. As Gascoigne writes, reading can be seen as, 'a negotiation of meaning.'<sup>347</sup> This negotiation can be seen in Vilain's text, *Faux-père*, both from the reader, and from his partner in the text. *Faux-père* discusses a relationship between the first person narrator, presumed to be Vilain, and an Italian woman, Stéfania, from Turin. She becomes pregnant, and while the male character struggles with how to tell her to have an abortion, she becomes more and more excited by the idea of a baby. Eventually she reads his diary and has an abortion, ending their relationship. Yet throughout the text, Vilain's autofictional persona appears to be trapped by the words he is writing. He writes, 'Moi qui courait après les mots, les mots me rattrapaient ; dans ma panique, je crus même que cet événement s'était produit parce que, ces mots, je les avais prononcés.'<sup>348</sup> The words themselves have a performative value for Vilain, echoing his own awakening in autofiction through Ernaux's inclusion of his character within her texts. In both cases, Vilain does not have a choice over the narrative or the outcome of the game.

On the other hand, the reader is still conscious that the author has ultimate control over the text. The autofictional persona writes, 'moi qui ai toujours pensé écrire ma vie, je m'aperçois que la vie n'a jamais cessé de *m'écrire*.'<sup>349</sup> Despite this turn of phrase, the reader is under no illusions as to the control structure in Vilain's texts. The autofictional persona's supposed lack of control over the narrative, and by extension lack of control over the reader is brought into sharp relief with Stéfania's abortion. When she discovers his diary, she has an abortion, giving the autofictional persona's

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<sup>347</sup> Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction*, p. 16.

<sup>348</sup> Vilain, *Faux-père*, p. 31.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 109.



written diary more credence than the persona. Script is thus given more control and Vilain's hierarchy of control is reasserted. Whilst an attempt has been made to counter the totalising power of writing, this has not been achieved within the bounds of the text, underlining the severity of Vilain's ludic strategy.

Philippe Vilain, as an autofictional construct, theoretician and practitioner has developed new methods for performing autofiction. His autofictional persona does, on the surface, appear to follow the established rule of relating the author, main character and narrator together to create one entity, despite his main character's lack of a name. Yet his persona uses autofictional codes to play with the confines of autofiction. Paradoxically, *Pas son genre* with its foreword both conforms to autofictional convention and subverts it through the persona. His use of intertextual space between his texts, and Annie Ernaux's texts, create a new form of autofiction that performs a role of stabilisation in the genre. Yet this stabilisation is disturbed by Vilain's ludic representation of his persona. His own depiction of his texts, as well as his criticisms of Angot's texts, reveal a dominating strategy within autofictional theory. Furthermore, Vilain's interventions in autofictional theory as well as the intricate web that he has created with Annie Ernaux serve to create a gap between his theory and performance. In the coding of autofiction, characters, including that of the main character, inevitably generate performances of gender. In playing with the boundaries of autofictional coding, does Vilain also play with the boundaries of gender? Or does he uphold traditional coding of masculinity and femininity? I will now go on to analyse these questions using the performance of bodies within his texts.

## Vilain and constructs of gender

Traditional coding of masculinity and femininity can be achieved through the body of the characters depicted, as well as by access to culturally specific stereotypes. As Butler writes, ‘the classical association of femininity with materiality can be traced to a set of etymologies which link matter with *mater* and *matrix* (or the womb) and, hence, with a problematic of reproduction.’<sup>350</sup> Autofiction’s heavy dependence on the relation between the protagonist, author and narrator creates an interesting situation with the body referent. Without a body, it is impossible for the character to exist in autofiction. Yet what type of body can be created in an autofictional text? Can there be an autofictional body? And, if so, under what conditions can this body be supposed to exist? If the body is duly associated with femininity, as Butler writes, what then are the implications for male bodies?

The Barthesian concept of writing as ‘jouissance’ is also evoked by those who seek to disrupt the traditional role of the novel or of the autobiography<sup>351</sup> as it was by Ernaux in writing the ‘Fragments autour de Philippe V.’ Barthes himself played with autobiographical conventions, with his famous opening line in *Roland Barthes*, ‘[t]out ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman’.<sup>352</sup> In Philippe Vilain’s texts, are there differences in the ways that Vilain’s autofictional persona is constructed in comparison to other characters? Is there a difference in the ways in which Cusset constructed her gender, or does Vilain write in the same manner?

According to Vilain’s theories of autofiction in his own œuvre, autofiction creates a new secret language. He writes, ‘[à] la réflexion, je me demande si l’autofiction ne représente pas pour moi une forme de sténographie symbolique, un langage pareillement secret dont je pourrais jouer et dans lequel je pourrais me dissimuler à ma guise’.<sup>353</sup> Vilain’s conception of autofiction, therefore, is as language itself, yet I will argue that his language, and by extension his autofiction, has a performative function. This performative function can be seen in the performance of his autofictional persona. With each utterance and act of the autofictional character, Vilain’s persona gains vitality, depth and materiality. Through the repetition of these performative (and

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<sup>350</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 6.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>352</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>353</sup> Vilain, *L’autofiction en théorie*, p. 29.

metatextual) utterances, the character can come to 'be'. In this way, autofiction's language becomes autofiction's body.

Philippe Vilain, as an autofictional theorist, has set his autofiction as a new category, one in which the constraints of autobiography can be liberated. In his autofictional works, however, Vilain appears to follow one of the underlying problems of autobiography, in almost entirely deleting signifiers of his own body. As Halberstam writes, the body is not the only way that masculinity (and by extension femininity) can be encoded into the text.<sup>354</sup> Stereotypes can also be a key factor in the coding of gender. This section of the chapter will seek to show that in Vilain's œuvre female and male characters gender stereotypes prevail. The fundamental tension located in his work is unresolved between the disruption of autobiographical and fictional discourses on the one hand and the traditional stereotypes of women that are evoked on the other. His use of female characters as the foil to his autofictional persona conversely helps to create his autofictional persona.

## Female characters

From the beginning of Philippe Vilain's œuvre through to his latest text, female characters are introduced almost exclusively in terms of their physical appearance. In Vilain's texts, the two most striking images of women relate to women being cast as either mother or lover with some instances of a merging of the two stereotypes. The images proliferate from the beginning of Vilain's œuvre to the more extreme amalgamation of stereotypes in *Pas son genre*. Examples will be drawn from each text to highlight the main female characters characteristics and to demonstrate the monolithic nature of his approach to women, in stark contrast to his own autofictional persona. As Butler writes:

The normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as “being” – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic.<sup>355</sup>

The success of Vilain's autofictional persona is thus predicated on the disparity between his male autofictional persona and his female characters. Not only must his autofictional

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<sup>354</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>355</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 140.

persona constantly reiterate, his female characters must act as a counter balance to his persona in order for the persona to 'be'. Yet how are these female characters constructed? And how disparate are the masculine and feminine identities presented in his texts?

*Pas son genre* begins with a short section on the typical qualities of women in general, with women being described as being on a pedestal<sup>356</sup> or as a commercial transaction. The idea of women as a commercial transaction is reinforced again and again in this section with Vilain stating:

Ces femmes idéales s'indifférencieraient toutes, et je devrais alors parier sur l'une d'elles, miser sur l'estimation de profits, d'intérêts, d'affinités que je serais susceptible d'avoir avec telle ou telle pour en choisir une ; mais en admettant que cette estimation soit elle-même équivalente, et que je puisse m'entendre pareillement avec toutes ces femmes, avoir les mêmes affinités ou obtenir les mêmes profits auprès d'elles, alors choisir l'une me ferait regretter de ne pas avoir choisi l'autre, et surtout, ne me rendrait pas heureux puisque la possibilité de l'être avec l'une s'annulerait aussitôt dans la pensée que je pourrais l'être autant, sinon davantage, avec l'autre.<sup>357</sup>

Vilain's preface to the text encapsulates the concept of the ideal woman and the inability to choose the woman with the highest 'profit margin'. Furthermore, it is the male character that is in a position to choose, to dominate the proceedings. Vilain concentrates on his main character's happiness here, rather than on female characters who are homogenised and lack any agency at all. The image is of women as subservient, and corresponds directly to a hierarchical system with men as the dominant sex. In comparison with the previous chapter which focussed on Catherine Cusset, and her use of male bodies as objects, Vilain's position in the dominating position can be seen as similar. Crucially, Cusset allows some of her male characters the ability to overcome the first-person narrator as has been seen in *Le problème avec Jane* whereas Vilain never allows this to happen to his female characters. Agency can be given for short periods of time to female characters such as Ernaux's scene in *L'Étreinte* discussed earlier in the chapter, but his autofictional persona quickly regains agency in the text. Thus, Vilain's position becomes one of gender rather than genre.

His inability to choose a woman and the indecision which the male first-person narrator is discussing is a common feature of Vilain's texts and the idea is reflected

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<sup>356</sup> Vilain, *Pas son genre*, p. 13.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

throughout his œuvre. This is also the case in *Faux père* when the first-person narrator remarks, '[s]urtout, l'abandon au plaisir ne m'obligeait à rien. Il m'évitait de choisir une femme, une seule, et, avec elle, une vie rangée dont je n'avais nulle envie'.<sup>358</sup> In *Pas son genre*, female characters are introduced with references to their physical appearance, specifically to their body. Jennifer, the main female character is introduced as follows, '[s]on chignon, ses lèvres carmin, jusqu'à son hâle permanent, son chemisier blanc qui corsetait sa poitrine lourde, l'apprêtaient trop pour me plaire'.<sup>359</sup> Not only is Jennifer introduced as a physical object, she is also the object of seduction and of arousal. Jennifer's body is described throughout *Pas son genre*, whether she is watching a film<sup>360</sup> or at work.<sup>361</sup> In stark contrast the first-person narrator, who can be identified as Vilain's fictionalised character, is described using his personal thoughts, reflections, personality and his profession. His main character's personality is fully explored in stark contrast to the female character. He appears not to have a body, and is certainly not introduced by it; he is almost entirely physically absent from the narration, as opposed to Jennifer. Before the introduction of Jennifer (as shown above), the text describes the mental state of the first-person narrator for ten pages. This startling juxtaposition of the two main characters reveals the difference in depiction between the main characters in *Pas son genre*. Masculinity is coded into the text through language whereas femininity is depicted through the body.

Throughout *Pas son genre*, this discrepancy can be seen when male and female characters are introduced to the narrative. Other female characters such as Jennifer's employer and the first-person narrator's female colleague are described in terms of their physical appearance or their clothing, in contrast with the husband of the colleague. His female colleague is introduced as follows:

La femme que Jennifer ne reconnut pas, c'est celle qui s'avança vers moi, Sophie Pasquier-Legrand, ma collègue de philosophie, spécialiste de Wittgenstein, une brune sémillante, pull cachemire gris en V, jean, bottes et montre Hermès, blouson en peau de la même marque, une leçon d'élégance, un modèle de classique épuré.<sup>362</sup>

Despite this long introduction to the female colleague, the only reference made to the husband is that he is her husband, and that he is a lawyer. There is no corresponding

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<sup>358</sup> Vilain, *Faux-père*, p. 13.

<sup>359</sup> Vilain, *Pas son genre*, p. 20.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

description given to him, singling out the female character for unusual treatment. Although his colleague is introduced first by her job title, a description of her appearance is immediately given. Femininity and masculinity are therefore diametrically opposed in his text, with femininity equated clearly with the body.

*Pas son genre* is not the only text in which this strict gender binary appears to occur. Throughout all of Vilain's texts, women are not given an equal place in the narrative and are not developed as characters, in the same way as has been discussed in the case of Catherine Cusset's *Jouir* earlier in this thesis. *L'été à Dresde* also functions as an example of the way in which Philippe Vilain portrays and uses his female characters. Élisabeth is described as a model, and is almost immediately contrasted with a stereotype of Germans. Vilain states, '[c]'était une grande fille mince, alerte et remuante. Ses cheveux bruns ne lui donnaient pas du tout l'air allemande'.<sup>363</sup> Throughout the text Vilain describes Élisabeth as an object, and her beauty is the only characteristic the reader is given of her. Her desire to break free from the object is documented by Vilain and yet it only serves to further emphasise her as such. Vilain writes:

Jolie, il me semblait parfois, quand elle passait des heures à se maquiller, à se changer devant la glace, quand elle lisait *Casting*, qu'elle n'avait pas d'autres ambitions dans la vie, je veux dire qu'elle aurait pu se contenter d'être seulement cela, jolie.<sup>364</sup>

The first-person narrator cannot conceive of any other adjective with which to describe her, and performs the objectifying gaze again and again. When discussing marriage with Élisabeth, the objectifying gaze again comes to the fore and this time the gaze encompasses all women. He writes, '[à] quinze ans, je feuilletais les magazines people de ma mère pour y admirer les belles filles photographiées. Me marier avec un jeune modèle devait être une façon d'offrir à l'adolescent d'autrefois la fille dont il rêvait'.<sup>365</sup> Élisabeth is simply fulfilling a long-held dream for the protagonist to marry a model, but there is no discussion of her a person rather than an object. The first-person narrator's reflection relegating Élisabeth to a category is pressed further throughout the narrative culminating in his loss of desire for her after the character is told of her terminal cancer. Becoming more distant from Élisabeth, he writes, '[j]e regardais son corps exactement comme on regarde une œuvre d'art, avec une sorte d'admiration inexplicable et distante. J'avais

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

honte de l'embrasser sans désir'.<sup>366</sup> His lack of desire now relegates Éliisa to a work of art, retracting her humanity from her, and rendering her inanimate. Éliisa is not only robbed of any agency with which to act, she is also less than human. Her agency is further weakened by Vilain. He states:

Comme je n'avais pas eu beaucoup de mal à la persuader de m'épouser, il aurait été simple à ce stade de la convaincre de l'absurdité d'un mariage et, après lui avoir donné tant de raisons de m'aimer, de l'en dissuader.<sup>367</sup>

The lack of agency coupled with the characterisation of Éliisa as defined by her body, reinforces the gender binary with femininity encoded through her body. When her body begins to fail, due to the cancer, the protagonist withdraws humanity from her character and any semblance of agency from her. Femininity can therefore be controlled by masculinity and becomes worthless once the body has failed.

*Paris l'après-midi* is perhaps the most striking example of the overt categorization of women as a homogenous group. Throughout the text Vilain uses his female character, to exploit common stereotypes of women, and to portray her as typical of women in general. Stereotypes then become merged into a homogenisation of women. General stereotypes about women proliferate in the text such as, for example, when he writes, '[l]es femmes prennent souvent leur temps avant de s'engager dans une relation mais, une fois leur décision prise, elles y sont alors plus engagées que les hommes.'<sup>368</sup> This remark is simply placed in the text and then used to segue into a description of the female character's love for her husband. Each female character is characterised as being typical of a greater whole, denying individuality to them and creating monolithic representations of femininity.

Furthermore, the re-writing of Stefania from *Paris l'après-midi* to *Faux-père* is symptomatic of the way that the first-person narrator in Vilain's texts move from one female character to another. Female characters appear to be somewhat interchangeable according to the narrator, or perhaps more accurately, female characters can be re-written over another. For example in *Paris l'après-midi* at the end of the male character's relationship with Flore and the beginning of his relationship with Stefania, he writes:

Il me faudrait du temps pour passer d'une histoire à une autre, pour admettre Stefania, m'habituer à son corps qui resterait pendant quelques

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<sup>366</sup> Vilain, *L'été à Dresde*, p. 117.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>368</sup> Vilain, *Paris l'après-midi*, p. 36.

semaines un substitut ; les premières fois, faire l'amour à Stefania serait faire l'amour à Flore, ce serait éjaculer sur des souvenirs, ce serait, deux ou trois fois encore, éjaculer dans le vide.<sup>369</sup>

Again, Stefania's body is encoded as her femininity and she is not represented as a developed character, simply one in a line of such characters. The notion of being able to replace one woman by another, and the interchangeability of women is carried in Vilain's other texts. He writes in *Pas son genre*:

Je l'ai dit, les femmes sont pour moi l'occasion de rêver, une distraction de l'esprit : je remarque une femme, je pense à elle pendant plusieurs jours ou plusieurs semaines, avant d'en remarquer une autre que j'oublierai tout aussi vite.<sup>370</sup>

Women appear in Vilain's texts as a homogenous group with many references to women as a group, in stark contrast with the very few references to men as a group. This monolithic approach to women is therefore exaggerated with his many references of female characters to women in general. Vilain's use of female characters reinforces their similarities, and rather than creating female characters, conflating them into the same group. In *L'été à Dresde*, Vilain writes, '[à] la réflexion, en fait, je ne lui offrais rien, je rendais seulement à Elisa ce que j'avais pris d'autrefois à Catherine B. et je m'acquittais ainsi d'une dette envers les femmes'.<sup>371</sup> By resorting to the idea of women as a homogenous group to which it is possible to be in debt or in credit, the hierarchy is again confirmed. *Faux-père* emphasises the notion of women as a homogenous group that all Vilain's female characters will pertain to. The narrator's insistence on recognising women's main characteristic as their body is matched in his other texts and here, with throwaway remarks which pepper his texts, he writes:

Certains hommes tueraient pour le pouvoir et l'argent, moi je tuerais des hommes pour une belle femme, non parce que les belles femmes ne sont jamais loin du pouvoir et de l'argent, non que je sois exagérément narcissique, mais parce que seule la beauté des femmes parvient, au cœur de mon ennui, sans jamais me lasser, à me faire exister.<sup>372</sup>

Here the insistence is placed upon the beauty of women in order to rescue him from boredom. Throughout *Paris l'après-midi*, Flore Jensen, the object of the male first-person narrator's love and obsession, is objectified as a lover but has very little other

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<sup>369</sup> Vilain, *Paris l'après-midi*, p. 123.

<sup>370</sup> Vilain, *Pas son genre*, p. 21.

<sup>371</sup> Vilain, *L'été à Dresde*, p. 41.

<sup>372</sup> Vilain, *Faux-père*, p. 79.



role within the text. In fact, many observations are made about her by the first person narrator who has very little access to private knowledge about her. Observations are made by the narrator due to her gender alone. For example the first-person narrator states:

Je ne savais rien d'autre d'elle, mais je n'avais pas besoin de la connaître davantage pour me représenter sa vie, pour deviner que, derrière l'affairement dont elle se vantait, se cachait une de ces femmes mariées qui du shopping au thé entre amies, s'ennuie l'après-midi, occupe son temps en futilités desquelles elle exagère l'importance.<sup>373</sup>

This reading of her character is not borne out in the rest of the text and the narrator is shown to be unreliable. The unreliable narrator is also concerned with her body, treating it as a medium of exchange and writing, '[e]lle ne savait me donner autre chose que son corps, un peu de plaisir, si tant est qu'elle plaçât jamais sa générosité dans des caresses données puisqu'elle préférait les recevoir'.<sup>374</sup> Again, this is not borne out by the rest of the text as the female character falls into depression at the end of the relationship. The object of his desires becomes simply the body, and the ideal of Flore, not the expression of a relationship. Flore's transmutation into imagination reduces her status and she becomes interchangeable with other woman; her specificity has been entirely lost.

The introduction of female characters by their bodies or by physical appearance is not the only sign of differing treatment by the author of the sexes. Vilain compares Annie Ernaux's body to the body of his first-person narrator's mother in *L'Étreinte*. The scene depicted is the first sexual encounter between the narrator and Ernaux; a scene which had already been described by Ernaux in 'Fragments autour de Philippe V.' It is significant therefore that the only sexual encounter in *L'Étreinte* seeks to link Ernaux and his mother and appears to tie the two roles together. Vilain writes:

J'éprouvais à la fois un désir irrépessible de lui faire l'amour et de la répulsion en découvrant son ventre, ses cuisses ceinturées par l'armature du porte-jarretelles, cette partie du corps affriolée de soie, ces dessous que, dans l'embrasure d'une porte mal fermée, j'avais parfois, malgré moi, entrevus sur le corps de ma mère.<sup>375</sup>

Vilain's negative view of Annie Ernaux's body is compounded by the suggestion of incestuous thoughts. The conflation of mother and lover is a recurrent theme throughout

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<sup>373</sup> Vilain, *Paris l'après-midi*, p. 17.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>375</sup> Vilain, *L'Étreinte*, p. 34.

his texts and is a recurrence of the traditional stereotypes of women as seen earlier with the three main stereotypes of angel, mother and prostitute.

Vilain's mother herself is presented also in much the same way as Vilain's female characters. Very few mentions of his mother are made in *La dernière année* and each mention simply adds to the impression of a mother, rather than as a developed character. She is introduced in her own fragment with, '[e]ntre-temps, il a rencontré ma mère. Entre-temps, je suis né'.<sup>376</sup> His mother's agency in this fragment is non-existent as she is reduced to being met by his father, and she does not give birth to the main character in Vilain's construction. The character of the child, and simultaneously the adult, is focussed on the father, creating a bond against the mother.<sup>377</sup> As he is discussing his mother in *La dernière année*, he writes, '[l]a ressemblance physique, la seule vérité irréfutable qui la lie au fils qu'elle a perdu depuis longtemps'.<sup>378</sup> The only evidence left for any relationship between the mother and first-person narrator in *La dernière année* is physical resemblance. Her introduction into the narrative, through the object that relates to him in the grammatical construction, serves to create a further space for homogenisation of the female character into one.

Vilain's use of children throughout his texts is particularly interesting when applied to the lovers in his texts. I will take the examples given in two of his texts, *Paris l'après-midi* and *Pas son genre* to illustrate the conflation of lover and mother that Vilain performs in his texts. This fusion is particularly marked when the male first-person narrator becomes both child and father. Of the female characters that Vilain writes in his autofictional corpus, all the women are either described as wanting children or have already produced children, except in *Paris l'après-midi* in which Vilain becomes the child when they become lovers; they are all marked by the 'feminine' preoccupation for children. In *Paris l'après-midi*, Vilain writes:

Elle ne me résista plus, je ne sentis pas sa peur en l'embrassant. Je ne pris même pas le soin de lui enlever sa jupe Prada et je me perdis dessous comme un enfant disparaît sous un drap pour ressembler à un fantôme.<sup>379</sup>

The amalgam of mother and lover is not confined to *Paris l'après-midi* as both of these roles are mixed in *Faux-père*. In *Faux-père* Vilain writes, '[j]e ne distinguais plus l'acte sexuel de la possibilité d'engendrer, ni ne pouvais m'empêcher d'imaginer

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<sup>376</sup> Vilain, *La dernière année*, p. 15.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>379</sup> Vilain, *Paris l'après-midi*, p. 42.

l'accouchement, ses cuisses écartées déjà, la tête et le corps de l'être ensanglanté qui sortiraient de son sexe ouvert'.<sup>380</sup> His reduction of Stefania to a vessel for carrying his children is transformed into a disturbing image of childbirth completely turning his image from one of lover into mother. This transfer of femininity creates an interesting juxtaposition and removes individuality from Stefania.

In *Faux-père*, Vilain emphasises his difference from women, writing both about rape that women inflict upon men and the objectification of women. As discussed earlier, *Faux-père* revolves around a relationship with Elisa who aborts his child after reading for diary. Abortion is also, for Vilain, a renewal of the relationship he has with his father as well as an affirmation of life. He writes, '[j]e trouvais naïf de comparer l'avortement à la négation de la vie : avorter m'en paraissait la plus subtile affirmation'.<sup>381</sup> Throughout this text, Vilain instigates discussion of abortion as a simple procedure,<sup>382</sup> and his hyperbolic stance in the text is reinforced with references to rape, and to writing. More than once Vilain remarks upon women who have children instituting a rape of men. He writes, '[c]et enfant que Stéfania attendait, qu'elle avait décidé seul de se faire faire, ne me concernait pas. Pouvais-je considérer ce *viol* comme une preuve d'amour ?'<sup>383</sup> Again, Vilain remarks upon, and emphasises women who have children, however, this time the offense perpetrated by Stefania, his lover, is mitigated according to Vilain, and is only treasonous to him. Vilain remarks:

Et je me redisais que se laisser faire un enfant n'était pas différent d'un viol, que c'était là, oui, la façon dont les femmes violent les hommes. Mais je me sentais traître d'écrire cela, même à penser que je n'agissais contre personne, que cette réaction exutoire était légitime et que Stefania l'avait guère été moins, traître, en me soutirant cet enfant.<sup>384</sup>

The image of rape is not only confined to women who have children, but also to his writing about his father, and perhaps his writing everywhere. Vilain, in discussing his father's alcoholism and subsequent illness and death in *La dernière année* writes, '[m]on récit n'est-il pas, à l'image de ce geste défendu, un viol de la vie privée ?'<sup>385</sup> The hyperbolic stance in *Faux-père* with references to rape and to abortion shows an extreme case of the negation of femininity and of overcoming femininity in Vilain's work. The

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<sup>380</sup> Vilain, *Faux-père*, p. 81.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>384</sup> Vilain, *Faux-père*, p. 50.

<sup>385</sup> Vilain, *La dernière année*, p. 69.

first-person narrator is eventually betrayed by his writing and Stefania has an abortion, ending the relationship with him and to some extent with his family. Again the contradiction inherent in Vilain's writing bears witness to the tension created by autofiction.

## Masculinity

Up to this point, I have described Vilain's texts as upholding a strict gender binary with femininity encoded as the body and masculinity constructed in language. I would like to nuance this assertion with a discussion of masculinity in Vilain's texts. As I will show, Vilain shows moments of destabilisation in his conception of gender, yet his characters are always recuperated into the strict gender binary in a final analysis.

As discussed in the previous section, part of Vilain's conflation of mother and lover is contained in the infantilisation of his female characters. The main character in his texts has a tendency to read to his female lover in order to educate them and the purpose of the reading also seems to relate to imposing his cultural values upon them, a clear rendition of masculinity masquerading as culture. One of the key concerns of Vilain's texts is a traditional opposition of culture and the mind as part of masculinity as against the body as a feminine construct. As Jaggar and Bordo write:

Within our dominant traditions, the very concept of body has been formed in opposition to that of the mind. It is defined as the arena of the biologically given, the material, the immanent. It also has been conceptualised, since the seventeenth century, as that which marks the boundaries between the 'inner' self and the 'external' world.<sup>386</sup>

Three of his autofictional texts involve the male character reading to the female character in order to educate them, reinforcing the idea of a hierarchy wherein the male character teaches the female character. In *Le renoncement*, the male character reads to Catherine: '[j]e lui lisais des passages d'un livre. Elle m'écoutait en silence. La littérature l'impressionnait. Si je ne m'avisais pas encore de ses sentiments pour moi, je sentais dans ces moments-là combien ma présence lui importait'.<sup>387</sup> Interestingly, the female character is listening in silence; there is no discussion between the two characters. Rather, the male character is instructing the female character and simply his

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<sup>386</sup> Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo, 'Introduction' in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* ed. by Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 1–11 (p. 4).

<sup>387</sup> Vilain, *Le renoncement*, p. 17.

character's presence is read as important for the male character. Literature is also described as impressing the female character, with again the emphasis remaining on culture (traditionally seen as one of the constructs of masculinity) as opposed to the female character. In *Faux-père*, the situation is similar as the male character reads to the female character, Stefania:

La seule chose qu'elle me réclamait, c'était que je lui raconte des histoires, inventées ou non, drôle ou non, qui, je le sentais, la tranquilliserait, la ramèneraient à une situation d'enfance et, ce faisant, l'attacheraient à moi plus encore, à la manière d'un père, peut-être d'un père, oui, je n'osais me le dire, peut-être étais-je aussi cela pour elle.<sup>388</sup>

In contrast, here the male character is inventing the stories, and not simply re-reading texts to the female character. The female character is reduced to the status of a child instead of an adult, one who is taught and needs to have their opinions formed for them. Again, the female character is relegated in the hierarchy to those who have no power, and the masculine character is elevated to the position of power within the narrative. Not only is the masculine character re-reading stories as in the case of *Le renoncement*, he also holds the power over the telling of the stories as he is inventing them. Finally, in *Pas son genre*, the male character again reads to the female character, Jennifer. He states, '[m]ais ce qu'elle adorait surtout, ce qu'elle attendait avec impatience le soir avant de s'endormir, et qu'elle me réclamait, c'était que je lui fasse la lecture, que je lui lise des romans, les miens, ma littérature'.<sup>389</sup> It is interesting to note that in the quotation from *Faux-père*, the narrator specifically mentions the infantilisation of his lover, and the change in power relations that this signals. In all three of these quotes, as he moves from literature, to re-telling stories he might invent, to his own texts, he is constantly exploring the role of instructor. The similarity of the situation from *Faux-père* published in 2008 and *Pas son genre*, published in 2011, is also remarkable. What is more remarkable is that *Pas son genre* is not a specific rewriting of *Faux-père* as Vilain has done in previous texts. (For example, *Faux-père* is itself a rewrite of an episode in *Paris l'après-midi* with Stefania in Turin.) Not only is infantilisation evoked by the male character, the construct of the Pygmalion myth is evoked. Vilain writes that, '[J]ennifer réveillait en moi l'instructeur, le Pygmalion'.<sup>390</sup> By using writing to instruct the female character, he is moulding the female character into the object of his desires and again

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<sup>388</sup> Vilain, *Faux-père*, p. 86.

<sup>389</sup> Vilain, *Pas son genre*, p. 93.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

using the female character as object. Ovid's version of this myth shows Pygmalion the sculptor creating a perfect woman from ivory, only to fall in love with it.<sup>391</sup> Thus, the main character's sculpting of Jennifer reveals a more threatening side, as she can be moulded any way he chooses. Furthermore, he is also setting up a dichotomy between the masculine and the feminine in which traditional masculinity moulds femininity into any shape he desires. As Bordo writes, "[m]asculinity" and "femininity," at least since the nineteenth century and arguably before, have been constructed through a process of mutual exclusion'.<sup>392</sup> With the process of exclusion, masculinity is exposed as the dominant cultural motor and the main example of femininity within the text is reduced to the status of submissive.

According to the first-person narrator in *Faux-père*, masculinity can be created through children. He writes, '[i]l me semblait qu'elle avait compris cela et qu'elle était tombée enceinte pour faire de moi un homme. Cette femme devenait providentielle'.<sup>393</sup> Masculinity is therefore created from the body of a woman. During the rest of my analysis, I have focussed on the equation that Vilain makes between femininity and the body. In contrast, here Vilain focusses on the ability of femininity to create masculinity. Yet this idea of creating masculinity is not followed through with the rest of the text. Instead, Stefania has an abortion as the protagonist does not want children. The male character thus imposes his views upon her body, reasserting his will, his version of masculinity on her body, and by extension femininity. The initial statement destabilises Vilain's version of the gender binary, before reasserting it.

As I have noted, Vilain uses the body as a way to show femininity, and does not usually describe the main character's body. *L'été à Dresde* is the only text of Vilain's œuvre which attempts to break the male stereotype and presents a special case, as the text is the only one in which Vilain places any physical description of his male character. The physical description pertains to Vilain's character growing older and the signs of age in comparison with his young model lover. In this scene the first-person narrator is mulling over the age discrepancies in his relationship and contrasting them with his previous lover, Catherine. Whilst discussing their differences, Vilain uses his main character's body to access fears of ageing. As Charnley reports, '[a]geing is rarely,

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<sup>391</sup> Ovid, 'Pygmalion', in *Metamorphoses*, ed. by Madeleine Forey, trans. by Arthur Golding (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press), pp. 302–304.

<sup>392</sup> Susan Bordo, 'The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault', in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, pp. 13–33, (p. 19).

<sup>393</sup> Vilain, *Faux-père*, p. 74.

if ever, seen as having any potentially positive aspects: age means loss of physical and mental faculties, the fading of beauty, an increasing dependency'.<sup>394</sup> Furthermore, she writes:

Many long-established attitudes continue to pertain and there remains a clear gender difference, with ageing signifying something different for men and women and being generally considered less 'acceptable' for the latter; not for nothing is the term 'old woman' as insulting as it ever was.<sup>395</sup>

Charnley's representation of age as a gendered subject gives an interesting slant to Vilain's descriptions of ageing. He writes:

Il n'y avait plus de matin désormais où je ne m'examinais pas en détail, où je ne surveillais pas sans inquiétude mon poids, la longueur de ridules ou la profondeur de cernes, l'apparition éparse de cheveux gris, l'extension visible de golfes temporaux, tous les signes du vieillissement qui donnaient à mon visage, à ma silhouette, une physionomie différente, plus épaisse, comme si la mort de mon père avait simultanément imposé à mon corps de se redéfinir.<sup>396</sup>

The introduction of this short extract into the text begins to escape one of the problems of autobiographical writing, notably the effacement of the body. Whilst it might be tempting to see in Vilain's text a more overt transgression of bodily effacement, in fact the body itself is not described. Instead, general comments on the state of ageing as they relate to bodies are given. Vilain's reflection upon age, however, does not end with a breaking of stereotypes as this would suggest. The reader is only given an insight into the first-person narrator's thinking about ageing and the body in general. His main character's reflection about ageing presents negative characteristics, in comparison with the past, and despite his inward contemplation, the main character then moves on to discuss women as a homogenised group again.

*La dernière année* introduces a father figure into Vilain's texts, providing an interesting avenue to study the way in which Vilain sustains discussion of male characters other than his own main character. This text, published in 1999, details Vilain's relationship with his dying father and the latter's battle with alcoholism. This text is presented with a first-person narrator, identifying in the same way with other texts by Vilain. He intersperses childhood reminiscences with sections that deal with the adult

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<sup>394</sup> Joy Charnley, 'Introduction: Representations of Age in European Literatures', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 47, 2011, pp. 121–125 (p. 122).

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>396</sup> Vilain, *L'été à Dresde*, pp. 37–38.

narrator who is writing the text. *La dernière année* begins with a frank evaluation of the father's body which is presented as ravaged by illness and age. A list of short sentences evaluates the medical interventions necessary in order to keep him alive,<sup>397</sup> and relate to different parts of his bodily functions. This introduction to the text is in complete contrast with Vilain's autofictional persona, who is introduced to *La dernière année* through his thoughts or mental state. His father's body is often mentioned in the text in relation to his alcoholism, or to his cancer, presenting the body in a diseased state.<sup>398</sup> By establishing the father's body in the text, Vilain is giving a space to discussions of the body and masculinity, and yet as the body is diseased, the space is inherently other. As the body has previously been tied to femininity, his previous gender construction is nuanced and masculinity is rendered more complex. Conversely, this attaches no role to femininity. A comparison is then made from his father's diseased body to the first-person narrator's state of mind. Vilain writes, '[d]'une autre façon que mon père, j'ai besoin de me mettre en jeu, de risquer un peu ma vie. Je sens par ailleurs que je n'ai pas d'autre choix que d'écrire'.<sup>399</sup> The contrast, therefore, between the father's body and the absence of the main character's body is highlighted, through writing. As the father risks his body, the son risks his writing, perhaps echoing Michel Leiris' famous essay, 'De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie',<sup>400</sup> in which autobiographical writing is described as dangerous. The body of Vilain has been replaced in the text by his writing. Vilain's construct of masculinity, therefore, destabilises his autofiction in *La dernière année*. In contrast with the rest of Vilain's œuvre, the father's male body does have a space in *La dernière année*, nuancing the place of gender constructions in his texts. Despite Vilain's introduction of a male body into his text, however, the performance of Vilain's autofictional persona is unchanged. His autofictional persona is still constructed without references to his body.

In Vilain's autofictional texts, female characters are homogenised and their specificity erased. Femininity is equated with the body, and for most of Vilain's œuvre, masculinity is constructed without any reference to the body. *La dernière année* destabilises this monolithic approach to gender, creating a different performance of masculinity. Vilain's autofictional persona is not performed through his body. Instead,

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<sup>397</sup> Vilain, *La dernière année*, p. 11.

<sup>398</sup> See for example, Vilain, *La dernière année*, pp. 18, 24, 29, 38, 53, 71, 87.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>400</sup> Michel Leiris, *L'âge d'homme* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1973), pp. 9–24.



his persona appears to be channelled into his writing, raising the spectre of autofiction as the body for Vilain's persona to exist.

## Conclusion

As both an autofictional theorist and as a writer who produces autofiction, Philippe Vilain has created a new tension in autofiction as one of the few autofictional theorists who also creates autofictional texts. Yet contradictions remain from his theoretical analysis to his autofictional texts. Vilain's autofictional persona uses ludic strategies in order to either dominate the narrative as in the case of Annie Ernaux, or to stretch the boundaries of the genre. Vilain's intertextual game with Ernaux, through his autofictional persona, can be seen both as being controlled by Ernaux, the original author, and as controlling his own narrative. These strategies of control, along with the writer's meta-discourse, have been used to determine, and play with, the boundaries of the genre. Ludic performance in autofiction is furthered by his creation of an intertextual space with Annie Ernaux.

Vilain's treatment of differing autofictional characters, both his own autofictional persona and other female characters, present an intriguing insight into the construction of his autofictional persona. Throughout Vilain's autofictional texts from *L'Étreinte* to *Pas son genre*, Vilain performs different exclusionary practices such as the othering of female characters and the female gender. Femininity in his texts on the other hand, does not appear to be nuanced. Instead, Vilain's treatment of female characters provokes stereotypes and homogenisation, creating a simplistic view of femininity. Structures of masculinity are evoked throughout his œuvre to strengthen the strict binary status quo, and only show moments of destabilisation in his concept of gender. Although the father figure in *La dernière année* disrupts a monolithic approach to a strict gender binary, this position is complicated through his sick and ageing body. Vilain's strict binary system therefore is contested, although it is recuperated again by the author.

Philippe Vilain's autofictional project depends on an understanding of autofiction privileging the tension and doubt created by a disruption in hierarchies. In comparison with Catherine Cusset, Vilain's use of autofictional constructions invokes a stronger link with autofictional theory, obvious from the overlap between theory and practice present in his œuvre. The overall image of Vilain's work therefore, is of an unstable genre with tension between the subject matter, style and characters.

## Chapter 3: Repetition and Performance in the Autofictional Works of Chloé Delaume

*Le pays de l'Autofiction impose un pacte particulier: le Je est auteur, narrateur et protagoniste. C'est la règle de base, la contrainte imposée. La transgresser, c'est changer de genre. Or là-dessus, tout le monde ment.*<sup>401</sup>

Chloé Delaume's original approach to autofiction begins thusly; with a reiteration of the fundamental constraint of autofiction. Yet how closely can this be taken as part of her autofictional work? Can this truly be seen as a true reflection of Delaume's autofictional production? Or is her statement predicated on her transgression of genres?

Chloé Delaume, born Nathalie Dalain, a Franco-Lebanese author who writes only in her pseudonym, has aligned herself with experimental fiction and Doubrovskian autofiction.<sup>402</sup> Delaume first began to publish in 1999, and her first single-authored text was published in 2000. Her texts include collaborative pieces as well as single-authored short and long books, and she is described as a writer as well as a performer.<sup>403</sup>

Delaume's experience of trauma from her childhood coupled with her multi-media approach to autofiction has created an œuvre that questions the idea of a stable self, with one protagonist and one body. Autofiction, in Delaume's œuvre, thus questions the foundation for autofictional theory and posits new ways of thinking about the body and the self. *La règle du Je* was published in 2010 and sets out Delaume's vision for autofiction as well as weaving her own narrative into the text. It is not a traditional theoretical text of autofiction which is usually written in an academic style, but it is a form of autofiction itself, incorporating atypical French grammar such as the shortening of sentences and lack of punctuation. Thus, Delaume's theoretical and autofictional texts cannot be taken separately.

Delaume is exceptional in this corpus, given her adoption of different characters associated with the narrator and the author. She uses the characters of 'Clotilde Mélisse', 'Charlie Orphan', 'Adèle Trousseau', 'Emma Begon' and 'Anaïs' as narrators who make up different facets of her autofictional persona. The creation of new

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<sup>401</sup> Chloé Delaume, *La règle du Je: autofiction, un essai* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010), p. 18.

<sup>402</sup> Throughout this chapter, Delaume will be referred to by her pseudonym.

<sup>403</sup> Arnaud Genon, 'De l'autofiction expérimentale', *Parutions*, 30 April 2010, <<http://parutions.com/index.php?pid=1&rid=1&srid=123&ida=12200>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

characters that are linked with the narrator and author marks a turning point in the discussion of autofiction within this thesis, which questions the idea of the autofictional pact as between the author, narrator and character within which the character is understood to be one rather than many. Of course, as the authorial figure is a person with a body, questions can immediately be raised as to how all these characters can be related both to one another, and to the authorial figure. Further, how does this written body cope with a plethora of selves contained within it?

The answer lies in the creation of the autofictional body itself – constructed at each point in time by the reader and critically through each autofictional text. In each recreation of the self, the ‘Je’ created depends on the character and the textual context. Delaume’s use of different characters and narrators thus becomes a radical challenge to the constructed self, as well as the constructed autofictional persona. This persona is explicitly gendered, and used as a political weapon. Furthermore, Delaume’s construction of her autofictional persona explicitly excludes the body, recreating the authorial body as a vessel for the autofictional persona. Indeed, her œuvre clearly defines her autofictional persona as separate from her body. This separation of self and body creates a clear and extreme example of autofictional bodies located through the text. With each facet of autofictional personae that are revealed in each subsequent text, the autofictional bodies morph according to the reader, yet crucially are recreated for the reader. The vessel is almost always demarcated as feminine, yet how is this achieved? How does Delaume’s autofictional persona create multiple bodies, and how does this impact the autofictional narrative?

When Delaume is discussing the nature of criticism about her work, the feminine element is evoked. She writes:

Tu ne peux pas appliquer une théorie de genre sexuel à un genre littéraire, Chloé, ça n’a pas de sens. Je réponds : ‘Le je se reconstitue à chaque représentation de soi.’ Ils insistent : D’autant que l’autofiction en tant que genre, même littéraire, c’est pas prouvé. Je poursuis et m’appelle : ‘Le je est l’effet d’une répétition, celle qui produit un semblant de continuité ou de cohérence’. Ils crient. Mais pas plus fort que moi parce que j’ai l’habitude.<sup>404</sup>

The outsider voice here refers to ‘Chloé’ in the second person informal form, denoting familiarity or social superiority to her, as if she were a child or a simpleton. She also gives an impression of victimhood, suggesting that she has been the transgressing child

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<sup>404</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 80.

or woman for a long time. In contrast with earlier in *La règle du Je*, neither ‘je’ nor ‘moi’ is capitalised, marking a progression from previous incarnations of the subject and the personal pronoun which have been capitalised. Even in her theoretical work, experimentation plays a pivotal role. Yet in the very next paragraph her subject again becomes capitalised when she describes how she uses autofiction as she writes, ‘[I]’autofiction = un pas de côté = réappropriation de sa vie par la langue = mon Je est politique’.<sup>405</sup> As Havercroft has already examined, autofiction is always political for Delaume.<sup>406</sup> This switching of capitalisation is suggestive of a level of doubt and oscillation in her construction of the subject which I am asserting is a key feature of autofiction. Using this grammatical feature is also a symbol of her affiliation to non-standard grammar which is further emphasised by ‘c’est pas prouvé’ with the missing ‘ne’. In this chapter, I will also point to the power of repetition in Delaume’s autofictions as a way to create the basis for her characters and tie them to the autofictional pact.

It is impossible to read Delaume’s texts without a strong emphasis on the subject, and the autofictional persona’s positioning within the text through the creation of private space within the text. Throughout this chapter, I will focus on Delaume’s construction of her autofictional persona using different protagonists to create fragmented selves with correspondingly fragmented bodies that can be separated from public view. Through the use of non-standard French, and a myriad of references as well as multi-media sources, I will show Chloé Delaume’s radical challenge to autofiction and to the notion of self.

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<sup>405</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 81.

<sup>406</sup> Havercroft and Delaume, p. 133.

## Language and autofictional justification

It has long been established that autofiction's unusual fascination with theoretical frameworks has to do with the doubt and oscillation experienced in the genre.<sup>407</sup> This doubt allows authors to create both referential and fictional speech acts within the same text, switching with each statement and leading the reader to question the veracity of the text. The autofictional persona is crucial in my own conception, creating a modicum of stability and performing the autofictional body. Yet this performance can be reinforced by other autofictional authors as well as a wider sphere of references. Furthermore, autofictional authors appear to use other writers to explicitly access cultural knowledge of literature, forming a wider intertextual space in which the autofictional persona can exist. This enlargement of autofictional space forges a new dimension for the persona and functions as a reinforcement of the body.

Within the closed circuit of autofictional production and theory, debates within autofiction surrounding the definition and categorisation of the genre continue to proliferate. With this proliferation, authors can create a sense of belonging and an individual sense of identity through discussions between autofictional authors as shall be seen in this section. This can influence the creation and performance of their autofictional persona, as well as produce new forms of their autofictional persona. . Firstly, however, I will discuss intertextual references in her texts in order to show their usefulness in the performance of the autofictional persona and body.

## Construction of the autofictional persona

As has been seen briefly in the introduction to this chapter, Chloé Delaume's use of non-standard grammatical French is one of the hallmarks in her autofiction and follows in an autofictional tradition established by Serge Doubrovsky. Traditionally language has been seen as a male power structure which is transgressed by the feminine. Sellers declares that:

Unlike mainstream Anglo-American feminist fiction, in which women's political, social and cultural challenge to the status quo are thematically expressed, the explosions of linguistic and textual convention of French

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<sup>407</sup> Burgelin, 'Pour l'autofiction' in *Autofiction(s)*, p. 7.

women's writing can themselves be viewed as a challenge to the system in which to speak entails submission to the Law.<sup>408</sup>

Delaume's use of language appears to mirror this cultural confrontation, and provokes challenges through her atypical use of French syntax and neologisms. Further, this provocation is inscribed in the original definition of autofiction in Doubrovsky's *Fils*. He writes that autofiction is '[f]iction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l'on veut *autofiction*, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman'.<sup>409</sup> Doubrovsky's definition focusses attention on the syntax of the novel, despite not describing what that syntax might be, or how a different syntax can be achieved without any loss of meaning. Non-standard use of syntax will always create problems of meaning and this loss of meaning becomes one of the main issues with both Doubrovskian autofiction and Delaume's autofiction, leading to a key problematic within their texts. Despite this, the injunction to write 'hors syntaxe du roman' appears to have been taken literally by Delaume. Doubrovskian re-ordering of syntax can be seen throughout *Fils* from the very first fragment which follows as:

je n'ai pas pu. Je me suis rallongé contre toi. Lentement, j'ai dû tirer le  
drap sur tes

SEINS

je glisse vers ton bassin<sup>410</sup>

The lack of capitalisation at the beginning of the fragment coupled with the over-capitalisation in the word 'seins', is replicated in Delaume's texts and is symptomatic of Doubrovsky's style. In *Fils* Doubrovsky has employed three different languages to disrupt the central narrative, and creates a multi-textured narrative with no unified meaning. Moreover, Delaume exploits shifting narrative voices, neologisms, intertextual references and page layout changes to challenge the traditional structure of the novel as well as autofictional structures, with a web constructed with many layers of meaning. In contrast with Doubrovsky however, I argue that Delaume's syntactical changes and intertextual references go beyond confusion in meaning and begin to create a web of references for her autofiction. In the last chapter I discussed Philippe Vilain's multiplicity of references in his autofictional theory, which weave an intertextual web of sources seeking justification in an established theoretical framework. Diverging from

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<sup>408</sup> Susan Sellers, *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France* (London: Macmillan Education, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>409</sup> Doubrovsky, *Fils*, foreword.

<sup>410</sup> Doubrovsky, *Fils*, p. 15.

Vilain's practice, Delaume uses references in both her autofictional theory and practice, seeking established literary frameworks in which to build her texts and constructions. Delaume's frameworks come from published texts, as well as references to extra-textual realities, using popular culture, knowledge and expressions to base her character as well as her texts. I shall now draw on her text entitled *Le deuil des deux syllabes*<sup>411</sup> to demonstrate the multiplicity of references making appeals to extra-textual realities.

*Le deuil des deux syllabes* is a very short text of twenty-three pages which discusses the loss of Delaume's mother and the lack she feels due to her inability to call her mother 'Maman,' as a result of her death. *Le deuil des deux syllabes* thus becomes a lament for the loss of her mother. Despite the rest of Delaume's œuvre which is infused with death, this is the only text that focusses on the consequences of loss for those who are left behind. The text enumerates the ways that Delaume cannot process her loss through language, combining poetry and prose. Through the density of intertextual references, the text creates confusion in the reader and expands into an extra-textual reality. For example, Delaume writes:

De toi je ne sais plus rien les chansons de Georges Moustaki la chaleur écrasante se rouler un chignon avec un foulard perle boire du vin blanc très frais ou du café brûlant les films font pleurer autant que ceux qui font rire recevoir des amis fumer des Dunhill rouges changer de couleur de cheveux écrire des parodies de poèmes célèbres chanter du Nana Mouskouri dans la salle de bain lire sur le canapé déclamer *Ne me quitte pas* manger du chocolat porter des collants chair et Madame de Rochas. Le reste je n'en sais rien. Fais encore un effort. Raymond Barre et Sardou.<sup>412</sup>

Delaume's loss is not only a linguistic loss but also a cultural one and the variety of references is complex ranging from perfume<sup>413</sup> and cigarettes,<sup>414</sup> to politicians<sup>415</sup> and musicians<sup>416</sup> amongst others. Even if the reader is unable to understand all the references, the appeal to an extra-textual reality through brand names is clear, and an abundance of nouns gives the text a staccato and ungrammatical construct.<sup>417</sup> The repetition of these nouns is symptomatic of Delaume's autofiction and the reader is

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<sup>411</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Le deuil des deux syllabes* (Lassay-Les-Châteaux: L'Une et l'autre, 2010).

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>413</sup> Madame de Rochas is a brand of perfume.

<sup>414</sup> Dunhill is a brand of cigarettes.

<sup>415</sup> Raymond Barre was French Prime Minister from 1976-1981, whilst also serving as Minister of Finance between 1976 and 1978.

<sup>416</sup> Jacques Brel wrote and released, 'Ne me quitte pas' in 1959. Michel Sardou is a French contemporary singer.

<sup>417</sup> In much the same way through the plethora of references as Georges Perec, *Les Choses : Une histoire des années soixante* (Paris: René Julliard, 1975).



forced to follow more than one narrative strand, emphasising the multiplicity of meaning contained within the text. Further, the lack of punctuation adds to the staccato nature of *Le deuil des deux syllabes*, disrupting the text and adding to the variety of meanings contained within it. Standard French grammatical structure is transgressed through non-standard punctuation, and each time the reader accesses the text, the meanings can create new forms of the same text. By avoiding the traditional syntax of the novel, Delaume is creating her own text, and due to the multiple layers of meaning is creating a different text each time. Furthermore, each time that Delaume makes an appeal to an extra-textual reality, she is also explicitly pointing to the porous walls artificially created between fiction, autofiction and autobiography. Thus the references are used to build a framework in which her text can be read and understood.

Delaume's texts use a variety of methods in which to create a basis for autofiction. Not only are these authors referenced by name, they can also be referenced through their texts, and in so doing, the texts function as a way to anchor the autofictional persona in cultural memory, accessing previously published texts to create a web of autofiction. This trait can be seen in other autofictional writers, and is particularly pertinent with the usual content of autofictional texts that are focussed on relationships and intimate experience, entailing a possibility of overlapping content. Furthermore, with each performative act of autofiction, autofiction's entrance into the literary landscape becomes more assured. This web of references thus entails a linking of autofictional personae within extra-textual reality, anchoring the persona and seeking to counter the taboo of autofiction. Autofiction's status as a maligned genre, at odds with the literary establishment is itself a long established trend. As Laurens writes, 'En dehors de Cerisy, le mot est galvaudé, décrié, presque toujours péjoratif.'<sup>418</sup> Her view is shared by many and has created a defensive atmosphere in which authors often seek to justify their autofictional writing as a way to write their selves. Indeed Delaume also expresses this subversive potential, yet how does this function within Delaume's texts?

Through the creation of links between the extra-textual reality and her texts, Delaume sets her autofictional persona as the performative lynch-pin between the two. This basis for her autofictional œuvre thus serves as a platform for Delaume to fully integrate her autofictional persona, dissolving the genre boundaries of autofiction and

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<sup>418</sup> Laurens, 'Qui dit ça ?' in *Autofiction(s) : Colloque de Cerisy*, 2008, p. 25.

making the porosity of extra-textuality reality clear. With her autofictional persona as the basis for her autofiction, new debates in autofiction have been put forward.

One literary debate which centres on Marie Darrieussecq and Camille Laurens erupted in 2007 when Laurens accused Darrieussecq of plagiarism. Laurens' text *Philippe*<sup>419</sup> examines her relationship with the loss of her child, and is an autobiographical text. Darrieussecq published her text, *Tom est mort*,<sup>420</sup> in 2007, also dealing with the loss of a child although the text is fictional rather than autobiographical. Originally, the texts were both published by the same publisher, and whilst Tom is a fictional character, Philippe was Laurens' son. Laurens' accusation of plagiarism was made in a blog,<sup>421</sup> and Darrieussecq wrote a text in response entitled *Rapport de Police : Accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction*.<sup>422</sup> In addition, Delaume has inserted herself into this debate by writing a chapter of her text, *Dans ma maison sous terre*,<sup>423</sup> published in 2009, explicitly discussing both plagiarism and the original texts from Darrieussecq and Laurens. In her text, Delaume discusses many different characters with one of the chapters entitled, 'Tom (2000-2004)'.<sup>424</sup> Delaume's four page chapter further references a child of the same age who dies, explicitly tying into this debate. She writes that, '[T]om est mort. Ses cendres dispersées sont légères mais poisseuses, la densité de la calomnie. Ça tache un peu, colle aux vêtements'.<sup>425</sup> Delaume's autofiction is tainted by the perception of plagiarism that the publicity surrounding the case has brought, although this does not stop her from endeavouring to attract the attention to her as well. Her allegiances in Darrieussecq and Laurens' argument appear to be quite clear. Delaume's first-person narrator appears to be sympathetic to Darrieussecq as her first-person narrator does write Tom into the narrative. Further, there is no introduction to Tom as belonging to Laurens or Darrieussecq, creating a boundary between the knowing and unknowing reader. Her implicit defence of Darrieussecq is enhanced when she writes, '[p]arce qu'il n'y a pas de

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<sup>419</sup> Camille Laurens, *Philippe* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995).

<sup>420</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, *Tom est mort* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007).

<sup>421</sup> Camille Laurens, 'Marie Darrieussecq ou le syndrome du coucou', *Le blog de la revue littéraire*, 32 (2007) [uploaded on 15 December 2009], < <http://www.leoscheer.com/spip.php?article675> > [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>422</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, *Rapport de police : Accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction* (Paris: POL, 2010).

<sup>423</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Dans ma maison sous terre* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

mots pour désigner une femme amputée de son enfant, beaucoup en font des livres'.<sup>426</sup>

Her first-person narrator's rationale seems to be that many people will write books about a common human experience in much the same way as Darrieussecq's response in *Rapport de police*. Delaume's defence of Darrieussecq also speaks to her own experience in having lost her mother. Thus, her position is likely to be influenced through the ways that she uses references from other works which construct her autofictional œuvre. Through this autofictional web, Delaume seeks a basis for her autofictional persona that can only be achieved through the intersection of different media. By basing her autofictional persona in an identifiable cultural moment, Delaume's basis and persona is strengthened in extra-textual reality.

Delaume's only theoretical text is markedly different to her autofictional texts in many ways, including its attempts to anchor the writer within an autofictional setting. Throughout *La règle du Je* there are references to the overarching themes of autofiction such as autofiction induced by trauma, a propensity to discuss the nature of language and how this constricts writing, as well as a focus on the nature of truth and reality. Chloé Delaume is, as has been mentioned earlier, a pseudonym and she has chosen to use the first name of Chloé that has been brought from Boris Vian's *L'écume des jours*. In *L'écume des jours*, the main character Chloé embodies beauty and femininity, and dies due to a water lily growing in her lungs. Her surname, Delaume, comes from Antonin Artaud's *L'arve et l'aume*, an adaption of the sixth chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and there are frequent references throughout her works to both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Delaume's use of a pseudonym is unique in this corpus, and displays autofiction's ability to function when the author is called by a name other than their given name. One of the solutions that Delaume has used in her theoretical text is to have a picture of her opposite her pseudonym which has been written on the back cover of the text. Of course, as Edwards has written, photographs can be seen as an appeal to reality, beyond the ability of the author to attempt to write.<sup>427</sup> *La règle du Je* is the only one of Chloé Delaume's œuvre to feature her face as a photograph next to her pseudonym on the back cover of the text marking the link between her work and her image. Through extending her image to the pseudonym, Delaume is appealing to reality but also to the reader that the pseudonym matches a person. Further, there is also a sense of exclusion by the reader from the

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<sup>426</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>427</sup> Edwards, 'The Absent Body', pp. 80–81.

image, as Delaume is looking at her pseudonym on the cover, and away from the reader. Despite the necessity of the reader in autofiction, Delaume's political statement appears to exclude the reader, and is influential in creating an extra-textual dimension to her theoretical text.

This extra-textual dimension is reinforced throughout her text in the form of references to outside influences, both from autofiction and external to autofiction. She quotes explicitly in *La règle du Je* from as many as twenty-four different non-autofictional authorial references, as well as seventeen different autofictional authors. They range from Anaïs Nin, to Guy Debord, to Cioran as well as references to previous works she herself has written, creating an intertextual space with her readers, similar to that seen in the previous chapter. The high density (these references are in a text only eighty-eight pages long and there can be as many as five different references per author) of these intertextual references indicate a conscious interweaving of ideas so complex as to become difficult to follow and create a web of references from many different types of literature.<sup>428</sup> A challenge is presented to the existing structure of both fiction and autobiography as the text cannot be read alone, but must be read in conjunction with others creating a multiplicity of meanings. The references themselves also point to a greater scheme of legitimisation in this text. With each reference, Delaume is building her text upon the basis of others, melding her autofiction from the literary canon. In comparison, Vilain's use of intertextual references is primarily confined to his theoretical texts in comparison with Delaume's more widespread use of intertextual references, although both quote extensively from the autofictional canon such as from Doubrovsky and from Christine Angot. Repetition of these references inserts Chloé Delaume firmly in the theoretical sphere. In attempting to recuperate autofiction into literature, Delaume is both trying to transgress autobiographical and fictional modes whilst also being accepted as an author.

Delaume's performance through repetition is perhaps most obvious through her authorial persona and character. As Havercroft points out, Delaume's phrase '[j]e m'appelle Chloé Delaume, je suis un personnage de fiction'<sup>429</sup> is repeated throughout many of her texts, such that it can be described as, 'un refrain incantatoire ou un *Leitmotiv*'.<sup>430</sup> The phrase is most striking, however, in *La règle du Je*, itself a nominally

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<sup>428</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 77.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>430</sup> Havercroft and Delaume, p. 126.

theoretical text rather than an autofiction wherein the author's identity could be expected to be disregarded. Her repeated phrase is another repetition of Doubrovsky, although this time she imitates Doubrovsky's '[j]e suis un être fictif',<sup>431</sup> as well as Barthes, '[t]out ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman',<sup>432</sup> and links her construct through fiction. Of course, at the same time, the construct is still linked to autobiography through paratextual information such as the back cover. In many of her texts Delaume has written, '[j]e m'appelle Chloé Delaume, je suis un personnage de fiction' which anchors each text under her authorship to the others. There are times in her oeuvre when the dates of Delaume's birth change, although there is never any doubt that the character that has been created is the author, narrator and main character of her texts. I suggest that this tendency to repeat the same phrase over and over again serves to imbed Delaume's character and anchor it in textual reality. Yet this is a repetition of the same phrase and does not accurately reflect the depths of the autofictional persona. Delaume's use of performative speech acts give her persona the opportunity to develop. Of the other texts in her oeuvre, *La Vanité des Somnambules*,<sup>433</sup> published in 2002, illustrates this most clearly. Within this text, Delaume changes the dates when she began to be her character, shifting from 1999 to 1973.<sup>434</sup> Her search for a way to construct her identity leads the main character to deny her identity as Chloé Delaume in this chapter, only to reaffirm her link with Chloé Delaume more than forty times throughout *La Vanité des Somnambules* with the same phrase as before, '[j]e m'appelle Chloé Delaume'. This repetition is reinforced by Delaume's construction of her own identity, explained as '[t]u n'arriveras jamais syntaxe postillonnée par ma gerçure buccale : on ne naît pas Chloé Delaume, on le devient'.<sup>435</sup> Of course, this is an explicit reference to the infamous Beauvoir statement that, '[o]n ne naît pas femme, on le devient'.<sup>436</sup> Beauvoir's statement which is echoed by Delaume is again suggestive of an unstable construction of identity, and yet it is still trying to create a place through citing her phrase. Delaume's persona thus uses performative speech acts to both anchor and to develop her character. Delaume uses her affirmative 'Je suis Chloé Delaume' to emphatically create her persona, and returns to the statement repeatedly to affix the persona in extra-textual reality. Despite her use of Beauvoir, the birth of Chloé Delaume

<sup>431</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Le livre brisé* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio 2003), p. 212.

<sup>432</sup> Barthes, p. 5.

<sup>433</sup> Chloé Delaume, *La Vanité des Somnambules* (Tours: Farrago, 2002).

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>436</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), II, p. 13.

as a character is indeed necessary. Delaume emerges as a persona that is developed by the author; she is indeed born as Chloé Delaume.

Her construction of an ever-evolving character is given voice most emphatically in her text entitled *Une femme avec personne dedans*,<sup>437</sup> published in 2012. The text begins with a discussion of one of Delaume's readers who has committed suicide after her novel was refused by Delaume.<sup>438</sup> Isabelle Bordelin is described only by her mother who blames Delaume for her daughter's death after her rejection of Bordelin's manuscript. Delaume writes, '[c]ar elle avait un but, un objectif précis formulé très clairement : *Je veux être à mon tour Chloé Delaume*'.<sup>439</sup> Despite Delaume's claims that her character is constructed, the construction cannot move bodies, and Bordelin is refused permission to take the character. Delaume writes:

J'ai déserté mon corps il y a des années, je ne suis même pas certaine de l'avoir habité concrètement un jour. J'ai souvent l'impression de flotter juste au-dessus, comme si je n'étais rien qu'une toute petite conscience rattachée par un fil à son système optique.<sup>440</sup>

Despite her protest that her body is simply a vessel for her character to inhabit, this is evidently not the case. Delaume's construction of a personality is intended to be separate from her body, and she repeats the same statements many times in an attempt to create a persona from fiction. Yet this character does not function without a body; it is impossible to be a person without one.<sup>441</sup> Delaume's construction, therefore, can only ever be limited in scope and she cannot inhabit different vessels. Bordelin's request is therefore absurd, yet also the logical conclusion of Delaume's construction. Still, Delaume does allow other characters space inside her body, provided they are characters linked with her own autofictional persona.

One of the truly remarkable innovations in Delaume's texts is the diversity of characters that are linked to the authorial figure. Although Delaume is not alone in this corpus in having different characters (Eric Chevillard, an autofictional blogger who is discussed in the next chapter creates a different character), she is unique in the diversity of characters as well as the extent to which they are linked to the authorial figure. Of course, with this innovation, Delaume is courting risk as she moves further from one of

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<sup>437</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Une femme avec personne dedans* (Paris: Seuil, 2012).

<sup>438</sup> It is presumed that Bordelin is a fictional construction, as no evidence she exists can be found.

<sup>439</sup> Delaume, *Une femme avec personne dedans*, p. 12.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>441</sup> The functionality of the body is irrelevant; the mere existence of it is essential.

the few established parts of autofiction's definition which is to have one character tied to the author and narrator, creating elements of danger within the texts.

Chloé Delaume takes as her character's first name a name connoting beauty, femininity, fragility and a fantastical character with the disposition of an angel. Chloé is clearly a projection of the female ideal and appears to contradict her more radical written statements. As Arnold Weinstein says:

All [Vian's characters] have beautiful bodies, and they are virtually interchangeable; indeed, Vian hints that at least some of them share one another. Above all, they have no psychology, no inner life or thoughts to speak of. They are almost manikins.<sup>442</sup>

Chloé in Delaume's text is a more complex character. The reader is given very few references surrounding the physical shape of her body, albeit her characters share the same body and so are in a sense interchangeable as they are different facets of the same entity. It is particularly interesting that Delaume has chosen a character with no discernible depth to the character; as Weinstein contends, 'they are almost manikins'.<sup>443</sup> The manikin plays directly to the age-old concept of women as vessels, mirroring the character in a female stereotype. On the other hand, Delaume's project centres on her discussion of the inner lives of her characters and the struggles they face; their thoughts are the content of her works. Meanwhile, Chloé in Vian's works is constantly fighting death, whereas Chloé in Delaume's works is embracing death, as will be discussed later on in this chapter. It is interesting to note however, that female stereotypes have consistently been associated with nature and flowers, and Vian's Chloé who dies from a water lily in her lungs is a further projection of this. Furthermore, Delaume associates her body with a flower, enhancing the symbolic power of this metaphor. She writes that, '[c]e corps est désormais mon territoire. Mon terrain de je. Jamais rien ni personne ne saura m'en déloger. Jamais. Le sépale est soudé et nul n'y pourra rien'.<sup>444</sup> Interestingly in this section, although the flower has been used as a timeless metaphor for women, the word is part of a scientific vocabulary suggestive of a clinical approach to her body. Although not a neologism, the unusual vocabulary Delaume has chosen helps to obscure the meaning and begins to create a private sphere within her text, which the reader may find difficult to access.

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<sup>442</sup> Arnold Weinstein, 'The Fiction of Relationship', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 15 (1981), pp. 5–22 (p. 18).

<sup>443</sup> Weinstein, p. 18.

<sup>444</sup> Delaume, *La Vanité des Somnambules*, p. 12.

Autofiction has become known as a genre in which intimate details of authors' lives are dissected within texts. Outcries over the perceived lack of boundaries to the private sphere have been common. Autofiction has often been seen as the genre that makes the private, public.<sup>445</sup> Yet I would like to suggest that rather than merely discussing the intimate sphere, Delaume, amongst other autofictional authors have begun to create their own private spheres within their autofiction. Although Delaume's discussions of death as well as her inner turmoil are explicitly discussed within the text, there are signs that she is also shielding part of her persona from the public gaze. Her use of technical vocabulary, as well as a plethora of brands, seeks to create barriers of understanding between her persona and the reader. These help to shield the inner workings of the persona, giving the persona the illusion of privacy as well as recreating the intimate sphere. Yet this intimate sphere can only function if the reader believes the persona to be credible.

According to Delaume, she brutally attacked the works of Artaud and Vian, and was bred by herself, '[j]e les ai violentés : née de père et de père. Je me suis moi-même engrossée'.<sup>446</sup> Beauty and femininity, embodied in the first name of the character, are juxtaposed with extreme violence which is further underlined by her surname, Delaume. Artaud is most famous for his theatre of cruelty which advocated the use of rape amongst other violent actions to confront humanity's nature. Delaume's use of power relations here subvert the usual category of rape and establishes her power over the authors she is appropriating. She has produced a character that is developed extensively born of trauma and torn from literary works. Delaume herself mentions this in her text *Les juins ont tous la même peau : Rapport sur Boris Vian*, relating the loss of her virginity with her virginity of texts. *Les juins ont tous la même peau*, first published in 2005, is a collection of her thoughts about language, form and her relationship with Vian's texts. She writes:

Cette nuit-là est la nuit où j'ai perdu, enfin, ma virginité de lectrice.  
[...] Déchirer mon hymen, au sens propre, organique, sera une anecdote lorsque viendra son tour tant rien n'est plus marquant qu'une mutation tympanique quand elle s'opère soudain.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>445</sup> Shirley Ann Jordan, 'Reconfiguring the Public and the Private: Intimacy, Exposure and Vulnerability in Christine Angot's *Rendez-vous*,' *French Cultural Studies*, 18:2 (2007), pp. 201–218, (p. 201).

<sup>446</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 6.

<sup>447</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Les juins ont tous la même peau : Rapport sur Boris Vian* (Jaigues: Chasse au snark, 2005), p. 24.



Delaume's association between reading and losing her virginity also implicates the reader. Delaume's character is rendered unstable and creates an odd juxtaposition between feminine clichés and death and rape. Her constant repetition of her full name establishes the name indelibly with her texts, creating a web of intertextual references based upon her autofictions. Delaume's persona is furthermore founded in text, giving her a textual body that is reinforced through the explicit imagery.

Furthermore, Delaume negates the possibility of being a woman and a writer, almost denying her femininity. She writes that the feminine has nothing to do with her writing despite the characters chosen and the style in which she writes. She informs the reader:

Il ne pouvait y avoir la femme et l'écrivaine, deux entités distinctes. Ce n'était pas ça, le pacte. Le pacte autofictif tel qu'il fut paraphé. Au lu et approuvé précédait un article stipulant uniquement personnage de fiction qui s'écrira lui-même. Je suis libre à présent. J'ai fait le deuil d'un Je qui ne savait qu'être Elle.<sup>448</sup>

The construction of this paragraph is particularly interesting as it implies that there is a binary mode of being, and of writing. In fact Delaume goes further than this and appears to suggest that as 'Elle' she does not have a 'Je'. There is also to be an element of rejection of the autofictional pact which is seen as masculine (when the fictional character 'qui s'écrira lui-même'). It is Delaume's multiplicity of voices which contributes to her autofictional character, and to deny the presence of the female seems contradictory given her previous choice of pseudonym.

One of the most interesting features of Chloé Delaume's autofiction is the multiplication of characters, and the impact this has on her interactions within the texts. These characters give insight into the way that the autofictional persona is performed, in particular with the introduction of a private sphere in her texts. Delaume mimics the protection of private space, giving the reader a more nuanced autofictional persona. Delaume's use of private spheres, in particular, gives a sense of intimate space that the reader cannot access.

Of the four characters that currently are included in Delaume's texts, three of these are introduced in *Au commencement était l'adverbe*,<sup>449</sup> published in 2010. Of course, the text immediately brings to mind the famous beginning of John's gospel from

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<sup>448</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 18.

<sup>449</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Au commencement était l'adverbe* (Nantes: Joca Seria, 2010).

the Bible, 'Au commencement était le Verbe'.<sup>450</sup> This text consists of two short stories exploring the possibilities of authorial interactions with characters Clotilde Mélisse, Charlie Orphan and Anaïs.<sup>451</sup> The second of these relates the break-up of a relationship between Anaïs and Clotilde, with privileged access to Clotilde's thoughts as well as an omniscient narrator, yet Clotilde is also described as an author throwing the protagonist, narrator and author autofictional relationship into doubt. Of course, as Clotilde and Anaïs are two facets of Delaume's autofictional identity, the premise involves relationships within the autofictional construct, further complicating the connection. Constant reminders serve to remind the reader that this is an autofictional text due to privileged access to the inner workings of the author. Clotilde instructs Anaïs of her role in the text, stating, '[I]e dernier chapitre de mon livre. Notre histoire n'existe que dedans. Tu n'existes que dedans'.<sup>452</sup> Whilst Anaïs and Clotilde appear to be in a relationship and have their own private world to retreat into, the omniscient narrator also has another voice. This omniscient narrator in this section does not have his or her own body and has no first-person narrative voice. Instead, the narrator speaks about the characters in third person, in itself a contradiction as Clotilde describes herself both as a character and as an author.<sup>453</sup> The omniscient narrator writes:

Elle fit un premier pas, puis ses membres se figèrent. Ses pieds prenaient racine au milieu des galets, ses jambes se faisaient roche et ses veinures de marbre. Statufiée jusqu'aux hanches, son buste restait chaireux, bras et visage intacts. Et l'incrédulité s'évanouit de son âme, et l'effroi s'immisça aux creux de ses artères.<sup>454</sup>

Delaume appears to be at an extreme of the autofictional experience as she is actively seeking to extend the private sphere, one in which Jordan describes as a traditional feminine role.<sup>455</sup> The recreation of the private sphere is bound in the inscription in the text of the omniscient narrator, creating a dichotomy between the private and public spheres. Further, even in this short excerpt, Delaume is creating a neologism enhancing the sense of a private sphere to which the reader may or may not have access. This method of recreation of a private sphere presents a challenge to the typical autofictional construct of the private realm's removal. Delaume's omniscient narrator does not have a

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<sup>450</sup> Évangile de Jean 1. 1.

<sup>451</sup> No surname is provided for Anaïs.

<sup>452</sup> Delaume, *Au commencement était l'adverbe*, p. 85.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>455</sup> Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p. 26.

body, yet Clotilde's body is likened to that of a statue, another female stereotype of a possession. It is not enough for Delaume to describe the process of becoming a statue through the veins turning to marble; she further emphasises this through the verb, 'statuifiée'. The confrontation set by Delaume challenges autofiction, and is also challenging to the female stereotype as a, 'guardian of the private sphere'<sup>456</sup> setting her own autofiction apart from the other writers in this corpus.

Of particular interest in Delaume's characters' construction is her willingness to create a male character; Charlie Orphan. His second name quite clearly references Delaume's own situation without parents, tying her autofictional persona to Orphan. Charlie Orphan is introduced in the first of the two short stories in *Au commencement était l'adverbe*, and his frustration at his own character's non-hero status is voiced to other characters, named simply as friends of Charlie 1 and 2. Charlie's friend number 1, tells Charlie that, '[t]u es un pervers narcissique cliniquement basique, pour toi non plus l'auteur ne s'est pas foulé. T'es un stéréotype masculin qui te préexistait. Voilà comment tu as été conçu. Limité, sans possibles ni destin'.<sup>457</sup> The narcissistic male stereotype is indeed carried in the text and his character is lacking in depth; his friends have no name and are themselves stereotypes. The language constructed around them all is simple and clear showing no deviation from standard French language structure in the ways seen previously in Delaume's other texts. A masculine stereotype is introduced in this first scene of *Le retour de Charlie Orphan*, and repeated in the third scene. Both the second and third scenes involve Clotilde Mélisse who is presented as an author that is plagued by Orphan until she agrees to make him the hero of her text. Mélisse acquiesces to his demands and kills his character in nine-hundred and ninety nine different ways, although he begins to protest. Charlie is described as part of a political strategy to portray men as stereotypes and to disrupt the gender power imbalance: '[m]es personnages masculins sont archétypaux parce que je trouve les hommes archétypaux. C'est un choix politique'.<sup>458</sup> Again, Delaume repeats, '[q]uand je travaille sur un homme, je ne peux pas m'empêcher de penser qu'il est intrinsèquement du côté du pouvoir, ou qu'il cherche le pouvoir, que sa langue est celle du pouvoir. Et le pouvoir, ça me fatigue'.<sup>459</sup> In this section, Charlie Orphan is bound by the author; Mélisse 'creates' Orphan. He is also the only character she has created who dies; the

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>457</sup> Delaume, *Au commencement était l'adverbe*, p. 18.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

‘hero’ cannot live forever as the other female characters can. Despite Orphan’s short life as a character, he helps to legitimise Mélisse as an author and creates a situation in which one of Delaume’s characters has power over another. Mélisse is also indelibly linked to Chloé Delaume, emphasising her construction as part of Delaume’s character.

## **Autofictional games**

I have emphasised that ludic possibilities and games are an integral part of autofiction and indeed form part of the basis for autofictional definition. I have further suggested that autofictional games rely on the necessity of rules within the text or œuvre as without these rules, the autofiction cannot be read. Yet how does this function in Delaume’s texts? Wilson writes that, ‘as logically primitive modes of textuality, games pose the problem of intertextuality with paradigmatic clarity.’<sup>460</sup> If, as Wilson argues, intertextuality is an intrinsic feature of the ludic, how does Delaume’s constant and repetitive use of intertextuality function within her texts? Finally, how does Delaume’s unique autofictional persona create a ludic underpinning of her autofiction? And what does this mean for autofiction in general?

Intertextuality, remarked Allen, disrupts unquestioning control over the narrative<sup>461</sup> and thus provides us with an interesting entry into the ludic autofictional text. Delaume’s texts are created through a myriad of references that conjoin to form texts in which there can be no authoritative power and through which the autofictional persona can be constructed by each individual reader.

The possibility of encoding games or adventures into a theoretical position on autofiction appears to have been taken into account by Delaume, and has resulted in her most experimental forms of autofiction. These autofictions, far from producing a unified position or character, purportedly lend a more collaborative conception to Delaume’s autofiction and crucially change the repetitive acts of performance into a space to work more closely with the reader. I will now focus my attention on the texts that shift from being those contained within the physical parameters of books, into more composite creations. Through her autofictional persona, Delaume’s collaboration with her readers is a new form of autofictional game that has many possibilities. This includes helping to anchor her persona through the text.

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<sup>460</sup> Wilson, *In Palamedes Shadow*, p. 5.

<sup>461</sup> Allen, *Intertextuality*, p. 209.

One of Chloé Delaume's most striking innovations in autofiction can be seen as her approach to language and games. Delaume has adopted at least three different forms of games in her text,<sup>462</sup> although for the sake of space I shall only be discussing two of them here. This section will deal with *Corpus Simsi*,<sup>463</sup> published in 2003 and *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers*,<sup>464</sup> published in 2007. *Corpus Simsi* is composed of pictures of game play within the Sims<sup>465</sup> interspersed with text discussing the play of the game. The book is the product of an Internet game as different readers took over the avatar of Delaume using the character to explore Delaume's world within the Sims.

*La nuit je suis Buffy Summers* is based on the television series, 'Buffy, the Vampire Slayer', and in particular, on an episode entitled 'La dérive' when Buffy, the heroine, believes she is incarcerated inside a psychiatric hospital. Each section has a series of choices to be made, and the reader must flick the pages of the book to 'roll the dice' and to decide upon the next course of action. Both of these texts embody in a stronger sense the idea of participation in autofiction. Autofiction has always involved the use of a contract between the reader and the triptych of author, narrator and main character, yet this use of the reader involves one stage further of participation, rendering the reader an active and essential participant in the projects. Delaume gives the impression of relinquishing some authorial control to the reader and to this end, Delaume makes explicit the change in contract in *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers*. She explains the change as follows, '*La nuit je suis Buffy Summers* : à toute action sa conséquence, ses avancées labyrinthiques, ses paragraphes numérotés. Une autofiction collective, caillouteuse est l'interaction, le crayon y est imposé et les jets de dés hasardeux'.<sup>466</sup> The idea of a collective autofiction is somewhat erroneous as the paths the reader can take have already been written, especially as all the paths lead the reader to 'die' on page forty-four. Despite Delaume's claims, her authorial construction is very much present in the pages. Interestingly, the contract between the reader and the author and narrator has been changed such that the main character has become an amalgamation of the reader, author and narrator. There is always the option, as told by Delaume, for the reader to reject the contract, '[s]i vous n'acceptez pas le pacte de

<sup>462</sup> The three forms are of Cluedo (board-game), the Sims (video game) and Buffy the Vampire Slayer interactive book (television series).

<sup>463</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Corpus Simsi : Incarnation virtuellement temporaire* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2003).

<sup>464</sup> Chloé Delaume, *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers* (Maisons-Alfort: È@e, 2007).

<sup>465</sup> The Sims is a life-simulation game developed in 2000 and it is the most successful video game of all time. Players create a life for their avatar, building houses, managing jobs and creating families.

<sup>466</sup> Delaume, *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers*, p. 11.

lecture, passez votre chemin'.<sup>467</sup> The explicit manner in which the contract is presented reveals not a collective nature as told by Delaume, but a coercive autofiction, one in which the author and narrator still has ultimate control over the narrative and therefore a deeply traditional text. At no point do the author and narrator lose agency over the text at all. The challenge therefore to the structure of the text has not been fulfilled. Although the text does not follow a linear manner, and is expressed in terms of a game through the dice, ultimately very little is challenged in the discourse.

The control by the author and the narrator experienced in *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers* is not replicated in the game in *Corpus Simsi*. Instead, the project is more collaborative as readers can play the Sims character if they wish.<sup>468</sup> It is thus much more radical than *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers* and the text that appeared after the project was focussed on documenting interactions rather than the project itself. One of the central premises of the Corpus Simsi project is to create a new body for the personality of Chloé Delaume. In this way, the project is in direct contrast to Delaume's refusal in her most recent text, *La femme avec personne dedans* discussed earlier, to share her persona. The text itself is filled with pictures of the game, including many representations of Delaume's body in Sims form. Of course, the Sims programme insists upon many decisions surrounding the body including one that the sex must be determined, and Delaume's first-person narrator insists upon restating her femininity as well as the very fact of her construction. Each aspect of the Sims' life is re-constructed within the pages of the text, of which language is a central aspect. Her creation of a private world behind language appears to be one of the aims of the project. In fact she writes that:

L'idée du projet Corpus Simsi était aussi de permettre à ma fiction propre d'infiltrer celle des autres, concrètement, dans leur ordinateur. Mon avatar était téléchargeable sur mon site à l'époque, c'était la version 1 des Sims, nous étions en 2003. Des joueurs utilisaient mon avatar, et certains m'ont envoyé des captures d'écran, leur fiction intégrait mon personnage, les situations étaient souvent cocasses. Détourner un jeu vidéo, réaliser des pièces sonores, tenir un blog comme un atelier ouvert : il s'agit de prendre d'autres outils que la langue seule.<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>468</sup> On her website, Delaume gave her readers access to her avatar which they could download and use. It is no longer available due to the update.

<sup>469</sup> Havercroft and Delaume, p. 134.

Delaume's first-person narrator reveals a project to infect others with her fiction and to become interactive in a new way for her readers. There is however, a different language associated with the Sims, one made explicit by Delaume, and one which creates a private sphere. Delaume writes, '[j]e parle désormais une langue râpeuse bullaire picto-idéogrammes. Une langue éparpillée, répondant à des règles et des nécessités qui vous sont étrangères. Derrière le vivarium le joueur qui nous observe ne comprend pas toujours ce que nous nous disons'.<sup>470</sup> Despite Delaume's statement that she knows a language in pictograms, she has explained this language in words as above, undermining the radical capabilities of new language. Further, this new language is not used by the Sims,<sup>471</sup> negating the possibility of a new language that functions in the Internet sphere. According to Gaensbauer, Delaume's aim is to create autofiction that will stimulate the creative process as a collective rather than a typical reader/author dynamic.<sup>472</sup> In both of these texts, the implication of the reader creates a new understanding of the body that does not only encompass Delaume and her character, but the bodily participation of the reader. In order for the reader to be included, she still makes the distinction between her body and her character very clear. For example in *Corpus Simsi* she advises, '[l]e corps que j'habitais en sage réciténia jouait souvent à des jeux aux multiples supports. De la fiction crémeuse servie sur un plateau. Les fils du Verbe aiment ça, plus qu'un divertissement ça leur permet surtout de s'asperger d'histoires sans craindre de s'y dissoudre'.<sup>473</sup> Interestingly the expression used by Delaume of 'les fils du Verbe' suggests a masculine body; 'the sons (or strands) of the Verb'. Of course, the word 'fils' is striking here for the many implications it has in autofiction as it is also the title of autofiction's inaugural text, *Fils* by Doubrovsky. By using the word 'fils' Delaume is making a conscious gendered choice to play with language. It is impossible to escape the neologisms through which Delaume controls her autofictional texts such as 'réciténia' as well as the punctuation changes from standard French. *Corpus Simsi* is an interesting case study in the contradictions that Delaume's works create. Despite her attempts to create a new form of language throughout her œuvre, the language she refers to as the Sims language does have rules, unlike the previous examples of a private sphere and has very specific binary code rules as it is played on a computer; it is therefore limited to the expressions of the game and the possibilities extended by the Internet.

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<sup>470</sup> Delaume, *Corpus Simsi*, p. 46.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>472</sup> Gaensbauer, "'Autofiction + x = ?'" Chloé Delaume's Experimental Self-Representations', p. 222.

<sup>473</sup> Delaume, *Corpus Simsi*, p. 7.

The Sims themselves are also constructed as other with Delaume set apart from them, which is perhaps most obvious at the ironic revelation that the Sims do not create literature. Delaume writes, '[j]e vais vous confier un secret. Un secret glaçant en plombière : de la littérature, les Sims ne font pas'.<sup>474</sup> If the Sims do not write literature, Delaume cannot be one of them as she is an 'être de fiction'. Of course the Sims cannot write as they are fictional constructs within a video game, ironically demonstrating the limits of Delaume's construct. Moreover, without language and fiction, which have been intertwined in her texts, her construct of Chloé Delaume is entirely negated. *Corpus Simsi* therefore has created both the negation of Delaume as well as the capacity for her to truly step outside of herself and use other humans to control her construct. This inherent tension is never resolved although the text ends with Delaume's character co-opted into the 'nous' of the Sims. Her attempt to create a new language within a world ultimately is unsuccessful, and instead the reader must look to her peculiar syntax to see her subversion at work.

Tension is inherent in the fictional construction of Chloé Delaume who has a body, and yet is also a constructed character, creating a continual feature in her works. One of the ways in which this tension is expressed is through grammatical French language structure which is constantly in flux in her texts. Delaume subverts the traditional language structure by creating shifting voices, neologisms, and questions directed to the reader. According to Jordan, exile and wandering, '[m]ay involve self-imposed periods of wandering outside fixed structures available for women, as protagonists seek the freedom to define places and structures for themselves'.<sup>475</sup> Delaume's exile is from traditional structures, and to an extent, she creates her own language in which to do this. According to her own texts, the reason why she does this is linked to language as a masculine system. She writes, '[n]os revues, nos journaux, sont rédigés dans la langue des hommes. La gazette people, les petites annonces, nous saisissent en ces termes. Les articles et surtout les livres que nous lisons sont directement reliés à notre système central'.<sup>476</sup> Delaume appears to wander outside the fixed structures of language, seeking to redefine her own language. One of the characteristics of autofiction has become the exclusion of the reader, or the recreation of new private space within the narrative. Autofiction often deals with relationships as well

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>475</sup> Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p. 27.

<sup>476</sup> Delaume, *Corpus Simsi*, p. 50.



as private interactions, with Doubrovsky beginning this trend in *Fils* in which he describes part of the protagonist's relationship with his psychoanalyst as well as with his ex-wife. Not only is the reader unsure of the position of reality and fiction, of that of the narrator, author and the main character, but the position of private and public spheres have been disrupted too. The use of a relationship as part of the text is now something common to all autofictional works as it transgresses the private domain. As has been seen earlier in this chapter, Delaume's works deal with the internal monologues she holds with other characters, with personal relationships and with the dead. Through this recreation of the private sphere inside the text, Delaume is presenting a challenge, through autofiction, to the process of what constitutes a private or public space. Delaume writes in *La Vanité des Somnambules*:

La cruciale sapidité à se résoudre sans casuistique *dans quel camp êtes-vous en 1983 vous le saurez en temps utile* 280 victimes d'homicide par arme à feu *nous voulons des renseignements* dont 97 femmes *des renseignements* en 1983 *des renseignements* 210 suicides par arme à feu *vous n'en aurez pas* dont 418 hommes *de gré ou de force vous parlerez* en 1983 *qui êtes vous* 11946 tués dans un accident de la route *je suis le Numéro 2* on communique plus facilement *qui est le Numéro 1* à mesure de la multitude *vous êtes le Numéro 6* il ne faut pas s'y laisser prendre.<sup>477</sup>

In this short fragment there are four different subject pronouns moving focus from voice to voice. The statement addresses the reader, yet also excludes the reader to some extent as the shifting voices seem to create Delaume's private, cryptic world. Through the use of italics, Delaume has made the shifting voices more explicit yet they do not appear to make either section of the text more comprehensible. Although autofiction traditionally uses the realm of the private and personal in the public sphere, here Delaume has created a new idiosyncratic zone where the reader cannot necessarily follow.

Interestingly, her creation of a private zone within her writing contradicts her assertions of feminism in *La règle du Je* and appears to recreate feminine space within her works. She writes, aligning herself with a traditional feminist slogan in *La règle du Je*, '[d]échiqueter le silence, alors être impudique. Travailler sur l'intime, parce que, lettres capitales : *Le privé est politique*. Une nécessité d'exposition du Je, mais même politisé le privé parfois rechigne à se laisser conter.'<sup>478</sup> Although she is writing the private sphere and so therefore allowing the reader access, the private becomes guarded by the

<sup>477</sup> Delaume, *La Vanité des Somnambules*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>478</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 66.

new style of writing she has created. Delaume becomes one of the ‘*guardians* of the private sphere – traditionally a woman’s role’.<sup>479</sup> The shifting voices indicate a stream of consciousness from which the reader is excluded and the lack of punctuation gives a paucity of signifiers, again adding to the impression of a private zone located in Delaume’s work.

*La Vanité des Somnambules* is not the only text of Delaume’s to use shifting voices, and different grammatical structures. *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides* can also be seen as a text wandering outside of a multiplicity of fixed structures. There are three different strands of meaning contained within this text. The first of these is discusses belonging and naming, the second, a familial curse, and the third is a more obviously traditional use of autofiction to analyse the breakdown of a relationship. The text itself is comprised of fragments with multiple narrative voices and it gives the greatest sense of Delaume’s ideas about language and grammatical structure as it is one of the most extreme examples of her texts. The text is based upon shifting voices marked by italics, although it is unclear whether there are just two voices here, or more than two. For example:

Quel chant *une petite cantate* entendras-tu *du bout des doigts* si me voilà *obsédante et maladroite* aphone. Quel chant *monte vers toi* quel sale filet *une petite cantate* oui j’ai perdu ma voix *que nous jouions* à trop l’avoir *autrefois harpée seule* la corde *je la joue maladroite* s’effiloche.<sup>480</sup>

Just as in *La Vanité des Somnambules*, there are three different subject pronouns in this fragment. Interestingly, there is also no question mark at the end of either sentence, although the construction of the sentences would seem to indicate a need for one. Again, by using two voices within one sentence, Delaume is subverting the course of the sentence and the traditional linear narrative of the work. There are also no page numbers in *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides*, giving an impression of a non-linear structure, and again excluding the reader. The voice in italics is another intertextual reference; it is a song by Barbara entitled, ‘Une petite cantate’. The introduction of this quotation provides the background to a private conversation that appears to exclude the reader from the public sphere. Delaume writes, ‘[j]e suis *courez courez* la fille de l’homme *vite si vous* qui viola le ruisseau *le pouvez* la Vouivre l’a mordu *jamais jamais*

<sup>479</sup> Jordan, *Contemporary French Women’s Writing*, p. 27.

<sup>480</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides* (Marseille: Centre Internationale de Poésie Marseille, 2003), p. 1. There are no page numbers, however for the sake of clarity I have given the pages numbers with the first page of text numbered as 1 through to page 30.

j'en garde les stigmates *vous ne la rattraperez*'.<sup>481</sup> The shifting of voices not only subverts traditional linear narrative, it disconcerts the reader and challenges the existing order of structure as there is no apparent structure at all in this short text. Subversion of traditional narrative structure takes place in a number of ways, such as page spaces in *Monologue pour épluchures d'Atrides*, the combination of poetry and prose and the incorporation of Greek mythology into a personal history. Page twenty-nine of *Monologue pour épluchures d'Atrides*, for example, has one phrase at the top of the page, '[j]'ai un nom paraît-il'<sup>482</sup> (with no punctuation) which is then continued on the next page as a page of poetry mixed with prose. She writes:

le choix n'est pas offert aux buissons qui s'ardentent de généalogie le  
choix n'est pas offert aux embranchements de sciure le choix n'est pas un  
leurre juste une taxidermie la facture en plaquettes la facture est sucrée le  
fatum un diabète j'ai un nom paraît-il un nom une crinoline<sup>483</sup>

The lack of punctuation subverts traditional grammatical structure and reinforces Delaume's rejection of masculine dominated discourse. Not only does *Monologue pour épluchures d'Atrides* use poetry and prose, there is an aphorism and an equation further disrupting and challenging the possibilities of what should be in a literary text.

Furthermore, the aphorism is a challenge to aphorisms with Delaume stating in the middle of the page, 'un aphorisme truculent eut été ici de bon ton'.<sup>484</sup> Finally, the poem in this text is a list of nouns; a nonsense poem with the first stanza as follows, 'un nom | une crinoline | une carotide royale | un taffetas leucémique | un autel damassé aux berges de l'Aulide'.<sup>485</sup> With no punctuation or link between the nouns, it is difficult to assert the sense of this poem which challenges the prevailing design of autobiography, fiction and of poetry. Indeed this is the central issue of Delaume's texts: whether it is possible to challenge the dominant discourse, to create a new language in the form of autofiction. Whilst it is possible for the texts to be written, the new language paradoxically cannot challenge the existing order if the language is misunderstood.

The temptation for Delaume to create neologisms, to play with the parameters of language is clearly very strong. Not only are neologisms created from existing French words such as the land of Somnambulie described in *La Vanité des Somnambules* which

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<sup>481</sup> Delaume, *Monologue pour épluchures d'Atrides*, p. 7.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

is relatively easy to guess, but words such as ‘emmusardées’<sup>486</sup> (presumably from the verb ‘musarder’, to dawdle or to saunter<sup>487</sup>) amongst others are also created by Delaume in an attempt to play with language and to fulfil the requirements of autofiction according to Serge Doubrovsky. Again, *La Vanité des Somnambules* is not the only text in which Delaume creates neologisms. They have been also been used in *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides* amongst others. For example, ‘javeliser’<sup>488</sup> is perhaps a derivative of ‘javel’ meaning bleach, however this is not immediately obvious from the context. She writes, ‘[r]aturer faute revêche orthographe menstruelle javeliser syntaxe les vers plus blancs que blancs les pieds sont décrassés au baquet Alexandre la chaux était crémeuse Sophie brûla ses bas’.<sup>489</sup> Through the creation of neologisms, Delaume is presenting a challenge to the existing order of language and creating a new sphere in which to operate despite the difficulties of comprehension which may occur. This approach to autofiction again creates the sense of an intimate private sphere to which the reader has no access. The linguistic challenge which Delaume presents in her works to the established order of grammar and narrative structure follows the structures begun by Hélène Cixous who described ‘écriture féminine’ as a style of writing which combats the perceived masculine nature of language. For Cixous,

C'est en écrivant, depuis et vers la femme, et en relevant le défi du discours gouverné par le phallus, que la femme affirmera la femme autrement qu'à la place à elle réservée dans et par le symbolique c'est-à-dire le silence.<sup>490</sup>

‘Écriture féminine’ in this context thus confirms the linguistic challenge demonstrated by Delaume in her autofictional works. Throughout her works she disrupts language, following in the tradition of ‘écriture féminine’ and breaking with the traditions of phallogentric language and grammatical structure and in this way her texts could be seen as ‘feminine’. Of course, there are many problems associated with ‘écriture féminine’, not least of which that this particular style of writing is exclusionary and difficult for the reader to comprehend. Furthermore, Cixous has always affirmed the political challenge that her writing represents.<sup>491</sup> Yet political language is not

<sup>486</sup> Delaume, *La Vanité des Somnambules*, p. 8.

<sup>487</sup> ‘Traduction : Musarder - Dictionnaire Français-Anglais Larousse’

<<http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais-anglais/musarder/52988>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>488</sup> Delaume, *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides*, p. 3.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>490</sup> Hélène Cixous, and Catherine Clément, *La jeune née* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1975), pp. 171–172.

<sup>491</sup> Kathleen O’Grady, ‘Guardian of Language: An interview with Hélène Cixous’, *Women's education des femmes*, 12(4), 1996–7, pp. 6–10.

contradictory to a ludic project. As Wilson argues, ‘Play is seen to be at once fundamental to human activity and absolutely metamorphic; game, at once atomistic and total, voluntary but inevitable.’<sup>492</sup> Autofiction’s dependence and reliance on the ludic does not exclude autofictional writing from a political and linguistic challenge to the grammatical order. Indeed, Delaume’s challenge to the linguistic order functions due to her reliance on ludic devices.

In *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides*, there is some indication that Delaume is also discussing a relationship with the reader as evidenced by a fragment as follows, ‘[j]e me souviens très bien quel était son prénom et quel était son nom. De quelle couleur étaient ses yeux ni gris ni verts ni bleus. Et lequel de nous s’est lassé de l’autre le premier’.<sup>493</sup> The relationship should normally mean that therefore this text discusses the private sphere, transgressing into the public sphere, and yet with the interlacing of the two dialogues, the neologisms, and the mixing of genres, *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides* has become a symbol of the way in which Delaume manages to create a new private sphere and present a challenge to the existing order of language.

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<sup>492</sup> Wilson, *In Palamedes Shadow*, p. 23.

<sup>493</sup> Delaume, *Monologue pour épluchures d’Atrides*, p. 11.

## Problems of the body

Critics have commented upon the body as, ‘one of the main sites of exploratory representation and critical debate for women’s fiction and theory’.<sup>494</sup> As Delaume herself writes:

Me réapproprier ma chair, mes faits et gestes comme mon identité ne pouvaient [sic] s’effectuer que par la littérature. Je ne crois plus en rien, si ce n’est en le Verbe, son pouvoir tout-puissant et sa capacité à remodeler l’abrupte.<sup>495</sup>

Delaume’s use of ‘l’abrupte’ in the feminine creates the sense that her body is rough texture, as something to be remoulded, yet how does she do this? How, in fact, can a body be remoulded and shaped?

Delaume’s use of the body within her texts points to an understanding of the performance of her autofictional persona. Her autofictional persona and body are intricately constructed together through the text. This thesis contends that the way that autofictional personae are constructed and performed creates a textual body that is enacted by each reader. Each reader constructs and performs the body in different ways, depending on the paratext, previous texts that have been read by the reader and the context in which the body is read. The reiteration of the persona simultaneously reinforces and develops the persona as well as constructing its textual body.

With each performative act, the body of the text grows stronger at the same time as the autofictional persona’s development. Yet this also entails an interesting juxtaposition with the case of the female body. The classical link between femininity and the body<sup>496</sup> creates a tension in the text which ultimately leads to an uneasy co-existence of the body as a textual vessel. Delaume’s case in autofiction presents a challenge to more traditional autofiction given her use of pseudonym coupled with her performance of her character.

Of particular interest in this thesis are the ways that authors use their bodies in autofictional enterprises. Autofiction is to some extent governed by the conventions of autobiography, and representation of the authors could be assumed in autofiction to include some description or use of bodies within their texts. If autofiction, as I have

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<sup>494</sup> Jordan, *Contemporary French Women’s Writing*, p. 52.

<sup>495</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 6.

<sup>496</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 6.

argued earlier in this thesis, and which forms part of my central premise, is performed by a series of speech acts rather one declarative statement such as ‘autofiction’ written on the front cover, how then, does this inform or affect the use of bodies within the texts? Can the body be created through performative acts? As Bordo writes:

The body, as anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued, is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body. The body may also operate as a metaphor for culture.<sup>497</sup>

The body is also an indelible reminder of the referential space that the autofictional character comes from, for, without this body, the text cannot exist. Certainly, as has been seen in the previous chapters, Catherine Millet and Catherine Cusset with their infamous texts, *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* and *Jouir* were exposed to much condemnation in the press for their frank discussion of sexuality, which might suggest a more open attitude from writers in succeeding years. The problem of autofictional representation is, therefore, more complex than might first appear if the taboos on female sexuality and, by extension therefore, their bodies, have not been broken. One possible hypothesis in Delaume’s work might be to assume that the fictional construction of Delaume’s character would preclude the author from discussing the body at all. Furthermore, the introduction of male characters, as well as more than one female character, adds an interesting dimension to the discussion of Delaume’s autofictional character, due to the obvious problem of differentiation of characters within the same marked body. Meanwhile, Delaume’s use of crowd-sourcing (as evidenced through *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers* and *Corpus Simsi*) creates a new issue, as the crowd-sourcing disrupts the relationship between the main character and the author, complicating discussions of the body. It is worth exploring the extent to which suicide and death, as the ultimate negations of the body, have upon Delaume’s texts. Firstly, however, I will examine Delaume’s main persona with a neutral body, before going on to discuss the inscription of masculinity and femininity onto her characters, as well as the use of suicide as a way to escape the confines of the body within her texts.

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<sup>497</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 165.

## Neutrality and otherness

Using an unusual construction in which the emphasis is no longer placed on the sex of the character involved (something usually clear in French), the emphasis in Delaume's most common statements about her body is placed on a neuter experience. Despite the different characters of Delaume, all characters appear to relate to one entity, whereas the body seems disconnected from each character. The neuter body is disassociated from her character and placed into the impersonal. Although emphasis in Delaume's texts usually begins with the body, the construction prevents us from knowing the gender of the speaker.

Chloé Delaume's autofictional persona is the only one in this thesis to be actively incarnated by her author. Delaume's repetition of performative statements creates a more nuanced version of an autofictional persona than has been seen in this thesis. Butler writes that:

iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualised production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production.<sup>498</sup>

Butler's 'ritualised production' can be seen in evidence with the introduction of Delaume's neutral body. Delaume constructs this body as a vessel for her autofictional persona, and all personal adjectives are effaced with the body. Delaume writes in *La règle du Je*, '[m]on corps est né dans les Yvelines le dix mars mille neuf cent soixante-treize, j'ai attendu longtemps avant de m'y lover'.<sup>499</sup> The body is placed very deliberately in the Yvelines (a '*département*' in the Ile-de-France region) in 1973, anchoring it to time and space, and it is attached to her through the first-person possessive adjective, 'mon'. Yet the usual construction of being born depends upon the first person verb form, not the third person as it is here, and the first person is introduced in the second clause of the sentence. When the first person is introduced, there is an obvious separation between them visually through the comma between the two clauses, but also through the verb 'se lover'. Of course with this verb, there must be an object with which to curl up, and the implication is that her body curls up with her character, creating two separate entities. Furthermore, no sex is attached to her body;

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<sup>498</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 60.

<sup>499</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 5.



although the reader assumes that the body is female, no specific language clues indicate this here. Often Delaume comments on the body as ‘being born’ without any gender implications, repeating this throughout her œuvre despite her character being gendered as female through language. Through her performance constantly reinforcing her attempt to avoid confusing her body with her character, the body becomes almost completely other to Delaume. In *Dans ma maison sous terre*, she writes, ‘[c]e dont j’ai besoin aujourd’hui, c’est de quoi est faite Chloé Delaume, apparue dans ce corps infiniment plus tard. Tellement plus tard que c’en est trop’.<sup>500</sup> Disconnection between her body and character is obvious, as her character is born later than the body itself. Her narrator is questioning the possibilities of Chloé Delaume’s creation, in fact indicating a further disconnection between her narrator and her character. Repetition of this idea throughout her œuvre is continued in one of her latest texts, *Une femme avec personne dedans*, published in 2012, which discusses the breakdown of her relationship with Igor, a pseudonym for her partner at the time. The text shows the breakdown of her relationship which is due in part to a female character known only as ‘La Clef’. Delaume declares that, ‘[j]e marierai mon corps et son appellation registre de naissance, certainement pas moi’.<sup>501</sup> Her physical disconnection from her body is so complete as to imagine two entirely separate entities that can marry one another. Delaume’s repetition of separation between body and character is constantly reaffirmed and performed, forging an odd situation. Meanwhile, with this disconnection between the two entities, Delaume is also re-creating the body as a vessel for her characters, establishing an interesting conundrum between experimental writing procedures such as the ones outlined earlier in this chapter, and an old cliché of women’s bodies as vessels.

This conundrum is reinforced by the different births that Delaume ascribes both to her character and to her body. *La Vanité des Somnambules* is a case in point as on the same page both entities are born. Firstly, her character is born when, ‘[j]’ai investi le corps qui fait le mien un vendredi poisson de 1999’.<sup>502</sup> Her choice of vocabulary reveals a take-over by the character of the body, rather than a melding of the two together through the verb ‘faire’. On the same page Delaume writes, ‘[j]e suis née le 10 mars 1973 à quelques kilomètres du corps que je parasite’.<sup>503</sup> With her use of the first-person, Delaume’s gender is obvious due to French grammatical structure and her

<sup>500</sup> Delaume, *Dans ma maison sous terre*, p. 104.

<sup>501</sup> Delaume, *Une femme avec personne dedans*, p. 37.

<sup>502</sup> Delaume, *La Vanité des Somnambules*, p. 7.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

disconnection from the body is clear. Further, her juxtaposition of the two fragments suggests a discrepancy between the character that was born as well as the body that was born, and at the point in 1999, the two were joined. Interestingly, the period between the two points is never discussed in her texts, creating a taboo topic, in itself a surprising development given the range of subjects that Delaume is willing to disclose.

Throughout her texts, Delaume uses her body as a casing for the more important character that it serves. In *La Vanité des Somnambules*, Delaume describes her body as a trough<sup>504</sup> or as a cock-pit when she declares, '[j]'ai les travers du corps qui me sert [sic] d'habitable'.<sup>505</sup> Delaume uses 'les travers' and 'habitable' to create a mechanised description of her body, as a type of suit that can be picked up. Her language evokes a casing that could be adopted by anyone, and that her characters use simply as an outer structure with no attachment to this object.

This disassociation of the body is repeated throughout her œuvre and a parasitic element is added to further reinforce the discrepancy, particularly in *Corpus Simsi*. She states:

La chair comme le papier ne sont pas nécessaires aux personnages de fiction. La seule chose qui nous soit vitale, c'est un espace d'habitation. Un espace où prendre racine. Je suis encore un nénuphar, sans vase sans bourbier sans mélasse la faim guetterait mes pulsations.<sup>506</sup>

In *Corpus Simsi*, it is easy to see the disassociation of body and mind, as the book is a narrative of her construction of a Sims character, moving the location of the character from the real into another world. In contrast with the mechanised description given earlier, a living plant is evoked, although the plant is only mentioned as working in isolation. If her character is not composed of paper or of flesh, it begs the question of what the character is made. Her answer appears to be that her character only has need of a space, yet it seems that this space exists in a vacuum, without support from flesh or paper. Delaume's insistence on association with a water lily ties directly to the female stereotype as a delicate flower, as well as Vian's 'Chloé' who died from water lilies in her lungs. Throughout Delaume's texts, she refers to herself as a parasite, and the crystallisation of her thoughts surrounding the body she inhabits appear to take place in *La dernière fille avant la guerre* published in 2007 and discussing her body in some detail. In other texts such as *Éden matin midi et soir*, Delaume has many different

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<sup>504</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>506</sup> Delaume, *Corpus Simsi*, p. 5.

characters within her body but in *La dernière fille avant la guerre*, she introduces the original inhabitant of her body, a new persona in her writing. Previously, Delaume has used different personae to express different sides of the same narrator, author and main character figure, but this is a new departure for her. *La dernière fille avant la guerre* discusses the problems that come with the original inhabitant of the body when the original inhabitant is displeased with Delaume's use. She writes:

Je sais qu'elle n'est pas morte, je ressens sa colère, celle des fillettes bafouées, un courroux affûté, rémouleuses déceptions. Parfois c'est une migraine, ses petits doigts furieux perforent mes tempes obstinément, les médecins disent que ce n'est rien, que je suis juste contrariée, que je somatise, interprète, mais moi je sens son souffle, son souffle d'enfant affamée d'une justice dont je ne peux maîtriser toujours le balancier.<sup>507</sup>

Delaume's character and the character of her body are almost entirely separated in this context, with the tension between them becoming clear. Further, there is a barrier set between the public sphere of the doctor and the private sphere of the inner workings of Chloé Delaume. It is interesting that although the reader can access the private sphere of Delaume through her writing, the reader can never be privy to how the original inhabitant of the body feels about the invasion. In one episode in *La dernière fille avant la guerre*, Delaume uses an imaginary letter to exemplify the way she relates to her body as well as the legal process between two aspects of Delaume's character if she were found to have taken over the body. Part of the letter reads:

Notre rapport de contre-expertise est formel : votre corps a été acquis de manière frauduleuse. En abusant l'identité majoritaire, et en dissimulant volontairement aux autorités le dysfonctionnement de ce bien, vous avez délibérément transgressé le règlement. Il nous semble utile de vous rappeler que celui-ci est d'une grande fermeté, afin d'éviter les pertes dont vous faites désormais partie.<sup>508</sup>

Her body is described as a 'bien'; meaning both a good as well as wealth. In this sense, the original owner's wealth has been stolen, yet it has been stolen by one who simply needs a storage container, not one who makes use of the body itself. The distinction between the parasite described in the rest of Delaume's work and the body which is still inhabited by the original 'owner' is also striking. Throughout most of her work, the impression given by Delaume is that of a body which only her character inhabits (of

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<sup>507</sup> Chloé Delaume, *La dernière fille avant la guerre* (Paris: Naïve, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

course with the multiple personae she possesses), not a body that she is sharing with another character. She repeats this idea in her autofictional theory comparing her inner struggle with that of a migraine, writing:

Au dedans c'est serein, sauf quand elle intervient mais je sais la faire taire.  
Je ne mens pas, elle se trompe et s'égare dans mon crâne, je déteste son grain, l'aigu de la tessiture. La même langue que moi, mais qui se fait bifide. Elle est, je le sais, à l'ennemi.<sup>509</sup>

Her private sphere has been extended to include the original inhabitant of the body, as the reader can never access that part of her construction. Furthermore, due to the constant repetition of 'Je m'appelle Chloé Delaume' discussed in the earlier part of this chapter, the dissonance between the two aspects of her persona is growing and her body is entirely disassociated from the repetition that she expounds. Characters themselves, are caught in a contradiction between re-appropriation and justification. One of the ways this can be seen is through Clotilde Mélisse, one of Delaume's characters.

Mélisse has been described as an author, but she is also a 'personnage de fiction'<sup>510</sup> and she is born at the same time as Delaume.<sup>511</sup> Clotilde Mélisse and Chloé Delaume are, nonetheless, not interchangeable, and reveal different facets of the same authorial presence. Mélisse suffers from hysteria,<sup>512</sup> which given Delaume's stated intentions<sup>513</sup> to be a feminist writer is somewhat contradictory. Hysteria, no longer recognised as a disease, was used to describe feminine complaints and was used to subdue, '[t]he normal functioning of women's sexuality in a patriarchal social context that did not recognise its essential difference from male sexuality'.<sup>514</sup> Her characters, therefore, do not always follow the same path as might be expected. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Delaume has used the two parts of her pseudonym to create a character stylised as feminine, and yet with her body described as other and neutralised, the result is a hybrid and confusing mix.

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<sup>509</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 30.

<sup>510</sup> Delaume, *Au commencement était l'adverbe*, p. 7.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>512</sup> Delaume, *Dans ma maison sous terre*, p. 31.

<sup>513</sup> Delaume, *La règle du Je*, p. 80.

<sup>514</sup> Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: 'Hysteria,' the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 3.

## Death and suicide

All of Delaume's texts are infused with personal tragedy and death. In fact, her website<sup>515</sup> uses a coffin motif, and her twitter page has, as a background picture, a stone Pac-man with gravestones as Pac-Man's enemies.<sup>516</sup> Images of death permeate her work, most particularly allusions to suicide, although other forms of death, such as that of her mother equally gain space inside her texts. *Le deuil des deux syllabes*, is a pertinent example for showcasing Delaume's obsession as it links loss of language with the loss of her mother. She writes:

Est-ce qu'un mot perd son sens quand il est adressé et à une étrangère et à une sale connasse. Je te demande, maman. C'est à toi de me répondre, je ne sais plus où j'en suis. Quand je lui disais maman ça me broyait le cœur et me déchiquetait l'âme, ça souillait ta mémoire et officialisait leur désir impérieux de me faire participer à leur immense campagne de réhabilitation de la famille Leroux, lignée dégénérée bourgeoise provinciale faillite et alcoolisme, TOC et paranoïa, troubles divers, hygiénisme.<sup>517</sup>

The question to which Delaume is referring is whether she should have been told to call her aunt, 'Maman' after her mother's death. Notably, Delaume uses her mother's surname here, despite her pseudonym and is not participating in the rehabilitation of her family. Although Delaume's other texts have also articulated the loss of language, *Le deuil des deux syllabes* is the first text to equate language loss with the loss of the mother. Throughout this text, the word 'Maman' is expressed many times and, as can be seen from the quotation, the character of mother is addressed directly, excluding the reader from the conversation. Instead, a new private sphere has been formed inside the text, and language is at the heart of it. Delaume writes:

Attendre la pleine lune et sur une table en verre découper le Petit Robert. Délicatement prélever le mot maman. Le déposer dans une coupelle d'argent, sur un lit de jasmin et de pétales de roses fraîches. Faire brûler de la poudre de protection aux points cardinaux tout autour. Commencer les incantations en allumant le bûcher d'intérieur.<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> [www.chloedelaume.net](http://www.chloedelaume.net) [accessed 04 March 2015]

<sup>516</sup> [https://twitter.com/chloe\\_delaume](https://twitter.com/chloe_delaume) [accessed 04 March 2015]

<sup>517</sup> Delaume, *Le deuil des deux syllabes*, p. 11.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

Delaume's enactment of language has become such that it takes form and body, yet her instinct is to 'kill' the word. By killing the form, Delaume is perpetrating a hostile act upon language and public discourse.

Perhaps the ultimate act of transgression upon civil society that a character can portray is that of a suicide, as a complete rejection of that society. As Higgonet writes, '[s]uicide, like women and truth, is both fetish and taboo. A symbolic gesture, it is doubly so for women who inscribe on their own bodies cultural reflections and projections, affirmation and negation'.<sup>519</sup> Delaume writing in *Éden matin midi et soir*, published in 2008, which surrounds the narrative of her suicide attempts, notes, '[l]e suicide, c'est un acte intime, faut pas que ça abîme quelqu'un d'autre que les pompiers, qui, eux, ont reçu une formation'.<sup>520</sup> This version of suicide as the ultimate act of the private sphere seems to come full circle and becomes part of the public sphere. Delaume creates the private sphere of her suicide attempt, in fact recreating it over and over again, but allows the reader and those who find her suicide to pursue this re-enactment. Her narrative style does not succeed the creation of the private sphere and *Éden matin midi et soir* follows the pattern of autofiction as a way to access the private sphere. Furthermore, the private sphere is specifically marked by the feminine. The text begins with, '[h]ier soir, j'ai voté la mort. Je me suis longuement concertée et dedans on était d'accord, toutes d'accord, pour une fois'.<sup>521</sup> The implication with 'toutes' here is that the voices inside her body are all feminine and this is followed by a strict demarcation between women and men who commit suicide. (Despite this, *Au commencement était l'adverbe*, published one year later than *Éden matin midi et soir* does have a male character, although he is killed during the course of the text.) Delaume has already chosen to die by stabbing herself, although previously in this text she has mentioned previous attempts of suicide using different methods, all of which have been stopped by meddling neighbours.<sup>522</sup> She writes:

J'ai tout le temps envie de mourir. Ce n'est pas très original. Chaque année, plus de 10 000 personnes se suicident en France. Ça fait une suppression toutes les 50 minutes. Deux tiers d'hommes pour un tiers de femmes. Je ne

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<sup>519</sup> Margaret Higgonet, 'Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide' in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 68–83, (p. 68).

<sup>520</sup> Chloé Delaume, *Éden matin midi et soir* (Nantes: Joca Seria, 2009), pp. 8–9.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

sais pas si dans les sociétés matriarcales c'est le contraire, mais y a des chances.<sup>523</sup>

This difference between men and women who commit suicide is continued throughout this section to delineate the supposed differences between men and women's psyches. Her interweaving of referential, verifiable information creates a link between her own struggles as that of an autofictional character and the struggles that others experience in the referential sphere. With the narrative surrounding suicide, one would expect copious mentions of the body of the main character despite the difficulty faced due to the main character being an invention of the authorial persona. Whilst this is true, the images that appear throughout this text serve to disgust and to alienate the reader. Delaume discusses her current wish to commit suicide through stabbing herself to death. She writes that, '[d]e retour à la maison je prendrai un couteau, et me l'enfoncerai dans le cœur. J'en aurai le courage et je serai soulagée quand mon sang bousillera pour de bon le parquet'.<sup>524</sup> The violent and shocking imagery serve to nauseate the reader. This is continued throughout the narrative, with more examples to disgust and alienate the reader such as, '[j]e suis pleine, pleine de pus. Mon âme est une nécrose, dans mes veines c'est tout jaune et ça fait des grumeaux'.<sup>525</sup> Despite drawing the reader into what Delaume has already called a private and intimate world wherein she discusses her suicide attempts, her medication and the thoughts she dare not tell her psychiatrist, the private world is alienated from the reader by these descriptions. By rendering the descriptions graphic particularly in reference to the body after the attempts, Delaume's private world becomes both public and difficult to read, enforcing a sense of voyeurism from the reader onto the text. Her narrative voice creates a sense of unease in the reader, as in the following example, '[q]uand je suis dans une pièce je calcule la densité de la viande au mètre carré, trente élèves ça fait une tonne cinq'.<sup>526</sup> Throughout this text, Delaume speaks as narrator as well as using a different character, Adèle Trousseau.<sup>527</sup> 'Je m'appelle Adèle' gives the impression of Delaume's construction of Chloé Delaume, her primary character. The reader is further excluded from the text through a conversation between the first-person narrator and her dead mother, creating voyeuristic tendencies in the reader. For example, Delaume writes:

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<sup>523</sup> Delaume, *Éden matin midi et soir*, p. 17.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid., pp. 8–9.

Maman, pardonne-moi. Je suis née parasite par un virus funèbre, et toi, tu n'y peux rien. Mais alors, rien du tout. Il te faut l'accepter, c'est comme un accident. [...] Ça tient pas la route dans ma tête, maman, Je dois sortir, dis, tu comprends ?<sup>528</sup>

Delaume's first-person narrator creates an internal sphere through which she is addressing her dead mother. Through this internal sphere, the reader is paradoxically included and excluded in the same moment. Despite the monologue occurring between the mother and first-person narrator, the reader can still access the sphere due to the reading process. The text concludes with, '[i]l est dit un suicide toutes les 50 minutes, ce matin ça y est, c'est mon tour'.<sup>529</sup> With this conclusion, and the picture of supposed suicide which follows, the cycle is complete. If suicide is the ultimate in a private act, as Delaume stated confidently earlier in the text, the reader cannot follow, although by stating her intentions she is also committing them in a public arena. Since the publication of *Éden matin midi et soir* in 2009, there have been no texts published by Delaume that use the character Adèle Trousseau, perhaps indicative of a literary suicide or murder. Although Delaume continues to publish, Adèle is no longer a part of her literary kin raising questions about the trivialisation of suicide in her œuvre.

Delaume's use of private and public space in relation to death and suicide create interesting questions for the understanding of autofictional writers and their characters. If characters can commit suicide, the relation between the reader and author is complicated as is the autofictional contract between the two entities undermining the extent to which her works remain autofictional and experimental. With her innovative characters, Delaume has created new understanding of how many characters could function under one body as a vessel. Yet this innovation is difficult to navigate and ultimately weakens her referential abilities, particularly with the suicide of one of her characters. Although autofiction requires the use of fiction in its texts, without its referential potential the text cannot sustain an autofictional reading. Her treatment of the body as an object under which the characters are created, displays a destabilisation of what constitutes a body and an autofictional persona. In this way, Delaume creates an experimental method in autofiction which is ultimately impaired by her treatment of the female body in a clichéd way.

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<sup>528</sup> Delaume, *Éden matin midi et soir*, p. 43.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid., p. 46.



## Conclusion

Melding autofictional theory and practice as well as collaborative pieces, Delaume's autofictional endeavours create a complex and dynamic œuvre containing different formats and involving reader participation. Chloé Delaume's autofictional œuvre is composed of experimental constructions of the self, dependent upon the repetition of speech acts. Without the repetition of such statements as, '[j]e m'appelle Chloé Delaume', her autofictional persona comprised of the authorial figure, the narrator and main character would not operate. Instead, the statement holds all of her œuvre together creating part of an intertextual web, performing part of a cohesive functionality. In the repetition therefore, Delaume is creating both her character and herself, each time building upon the texts that have gone before. Furthermore, with each text that she writes she adds to the intertextual network already created, extending layers of meaning to produce an experimental autofiction which, in order to be read, depends on previous literature. Thus, her web of intertextuality creates a new form of private space within her literature, as does her language. Those who have admittance to this private space must navigate non-standard French, and yet inevitably be unable to navigate the entirety of the space, leading to the creation of a new internal space to which the reader has no access. Through the use of these private spaces, therefore, Delaume is creating a new feminine space within her texts and re-centring the feminine within language.

Chloé Delaume's discussion of her body further emphasises her use of private space, as her body appears to be a site of contention and conflict. Her body is constantly characterised as a vessel, with her character appearing as a parasite. As has been seen through the use of different characters such as Clotilde Mélisse and Anaïs, Delaume uses her body to carry the latter around, creating a situation with many characters and one body. Further, her autofictional persona has a lack of a body in some of her texts such as in *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers* and *Corpus Simsi*. Her body is conspicuous in *Corpus Simsi* by its simultaneous absence and presence. Through her avatar, Delaume's body is more present than in any other of her previous texts, although at the same time, her body is displaced as it is a computer graphic of her. Through using her body as a vessel, Delaume is re-using a familiar theme of women as objects, and at the same time trying to create a new space for her gender. Delaume's experimental approach to language through autofiction and reconstructions of the self can thus be seen as

simultaneously both undermining and new through her approach to the body. Multiplicity of selves is not a barrier to autofiction, and has been constructed in Delaume's work such that there is a strong link between the selves and in the autofictional contract. Despite this, Delaume's approach to the body is deeply problematic and constitutes an attack on the body itself, creating a dichotomy between self and body.

## Chapter 4: Parody, Banality and Innovation in the Autofictional Works of Éric Chevillard

One of the overriding questions in autofictional theory is that of the integration of multi-media within autofictional texts. If autofiction can be considered an overwhelmingly literary genre, how can more than one medium be used? And how then does the Internet fit into this mix? Can this blend of media add a new dimension to the performance of the autofictional persona?

In order to answer these questions, I will analyse the autofictional texts of Éric Chevillard. Chevillard is a well-regarded author, having won a number of prizes for his fictional works. Éric Chevillard published his first novel entitled *Mourir m'enrhume* in 1987 and since then he has published more than fifteen novels, won two prizes and currently edits *Le Monde des Livres* for *Le Monde* newspaper. One of Chevillard's current offshoots, and the focus of attention in this chapter, is a project he started in 2007 that has come to be known as the *autofictif* project which takes the form of a blog. Chevillard's project consists in uploading three fragments onto the blog every day with the fragments taking many different forms, from aphorisms, to poems, to prose. He uses an autofictional persona, written in the first-person and called 'L'autofictif', to relate anecdotes of everyday life as well as remarking on current events and more clearly autofictional tropes, thereby adding a metatextual dimension to his work. Comments on the blog are deactivated, and each new entry appears at the top of the web-page. The '*autofictif*' project began as a way for Chevillard to parody autofiction,<sup>530</sup> and it is now published in a series of books. Each book begins on the 18<sup>th</sup> September with the most recent publication (2015) entitled *L'autofictif au petit pois*.<sup>531</sup> Motte remarks that in Chevillard's fictional texts, 'there is often one central, obsessional idea that drives the narrative along.'<sup>532</sup> In the case of his project, his obsessional idea is clearly a way to parody and mock the new form of autofiction. The '*autofictif*' project focuses on parodying the banal and mundane nature of autofiction, as well as the use of the intimate sphere. Although autofiction's nebulous form and lack of clear definition may suggest a genre difficult to parody, Chevillard's project is to parody recognisable tropes

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<sup>530</sup> Éric Chevillard, *L'autofictif : Journal 2007-2008* (Talence: L'Arbre Vengeur, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>531</sup> Éric Chevillard, *L'autofictif croque un piment : Journal 2011-2012* (Talence: L'Arbre Vengeur, 2013).

<sup>532</sup> Warren Motte, 'Review: *Sans l'orang-outan*' *The French Review* 82:3 (2009), pp. 659–660.

within autofiction. These tropes are incorporated with identifiable traits from both his autofictional persona as well as his fictional projects. In previous projects, Chevillard's preoccupation with animals and narrative strategies have been prominent features, and these preoccupations are continued in his autofictional project.<sup>533</sup>

Chevillard's position at the end of this thesis marks an interesting development in autofiction as he is the only author to have attempted to parody autofiction. His use of parody in the '*autofictif*' project indicates a stronger sense of stability to the fledgling genre than has previously been seen in this corpus. Parody, of course, can only function if recognisable traits of a genre or object can be identified by the reader. If the original object cannot be identified, parody cannot occur and the author will contribute only to an extension of the genre. Through parody, therefore, the object (in this case, autofiction) must have stabilised in order for the parody to be recognised as such. In the '*autofictif*' project, there are many markers to project parody such as the foreword which explicitly explains the premise. Yet, in autofiction, the autofictional persona is critical with Chevillard producing his own autofictional persona. It is this tension between parody and genre construction that resonates within Chevillard's project.

Éric Chevillard is the only author in the corpus to have created his autofictional persona using the Internet.<sup>534</sup> His official website<sup>535</sup> maintains a picture of him, bibliographic information including a list of his texts, as well as a link to his '*autofictif*' blog.<sup>536</sup> Each update on the blog is signed by 'Chevillard' and, together with the link between his websites, the first-person narrator is inextricably linked to the author, Éric Chevillard. In order for an autofictional persona to be created, the main character must also be associated with the author and narrator. In Chevillard's case, this is done through specific references to texts that he has written such as *Sans l'orang-outan*,<sup>537</sup> and the discussion of his own writing.<sup>538</sup> Despite Chevillard's parody of the genre, this autofictional persona is critical of the genre and must be grounded in an extra-textual reality. Furthermore, Chevillard's exploitation of a derivative of autofiction as his title,

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<sup>533</sup> Albert Samuel Whisman, 'Review: *Sans l'orang-outan*' *World Literature Today*, 82:5 (2008), p. 66.

<sup>534</sup> Although Delaume has a web presence, the persona is created through her texts and the website was added in 2003 after the publication of her first text in 1999.

<sup>535</sup> <http://www.eric-chevillard.net> [accessed 04 March 2015]

<sup>536</sup> Of course, the blog can be accessed by typing in the link but the official website is also posted on the blog's page.

<sup>537</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 11.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

*L'autofictif*, explicitly engages with the genre of autofiction.<sup>539</sup> Further than this, the coincidence of a name joining the three entities of author, narrator and character is strengthened by the performance of the self created by Chevillard. Chevillard's persona uses referential information, as will be seen later in this chapter, to link information together.

Chevillard's project on autofiction uses intertextual references as well as an explicit discussion of autofiction in his first foreword. He begins the foreword in *L'autofictif*, the first volume of the *autofictif* series, with the following gambit:

j'ai ouvert un blog, quel vilain mot, j'ai donc ouvert un vilain blog et je lui ai donné un vilain titre, *L'autofictif*, un peu étourdissement et plutôt par dérision envers le genre complaisant de l'autofiction qui excite depuis longtemps ma mauvaise ironie.<sup>540</sup>

According to the first-person narrator, his autofictional blog is a way to mock its own endeavour. Parody and mockery are reflected throughout the blog and inject humour into many of the fragments of the texts. Yet this is entirely consistent with his previous fictional texts. Daniel suggests that, 'la mimèse s'attaque aux discours logiques, rationnels, qui se voient rabaissés à des formes stéréotypées du langage.'<sup>541</sup> Parody in his autofictional texts may also follow the same strategy, although it is important to note that Chevillard begins his project with an explicit attack on autofiction, suggesting that the genre itself is the primary target of his parody.

Chevillard's project begins from a position of parody, yet how is parody defined within his own texts? According to Linda Hutcheon:

Parody, therefore is a form of imitation, but imitation characterised by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text. ... Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.<sup>542</sup>

Parody only functions, however, when the object of parody has a sense of stability and when it is easily recognisable. In Hutcheon's definition, parody need not be a subversive act, yet parody has often been condemned on moral grounds for this very

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<sup>539</sup> Autofictional authors tend to use the subtitle of '*roman*' to play with the boundaries of fiction and it is one of the Doubrovskian conditions of autofiction discussed in the Introduction. There are no subtitles on the books of the *autofictif* project.

<sup>540</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 7.

<sup>541</sup> Marc Daniel, *L'art du récit chez Éric Chevillard* (Unpublished thesis, Université Paris Sorbonne nouvelle – Paris III, 2012) <<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00782753/>> document [accessed 04 March 2015]

<sup>542</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York; London: Methuen, 1985), p. 6.

trait.<sup>543</sup> Hutcheon's definition of parody specifically excludes humour. Yet Rose writes that, 'while parody is accompanied by a comic effect it need not necessarily ridicule the work of its target or parodee.'<sup>544</sup> Thus, while comedic effect in parody is essential, the comedy need not come from the target, dispensing with subversive possibilities. Indeed, Rose focuses on the comic, defining parody as, 'the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material.'<sup>545</sup> Rose's definition gives a much wider spectrum under which parody can be seen to operate. Her definition can also be seen as more encompassing of different genre forms within parody, yet Rose is sceptical of the inclusion of intertextuality within parody.

Dentith gives a comprehensive overview of parody in his study, *Parody*, and writes that, 'parody should be thought of, not as a single and tightly definable genre or practice, but as a range of cultural practices which are more or less parodic.'<sup>546</sup> The range of parody is crucial to Dentith's conception of parody which is as expansive as possible. He writes that parody is 'any cultural practice which makes a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.'<sup>547</sup> With the addition of 'relatively', Dentith expands even further on Rose's definition. Indeed he goes on to tie the use of intertextuality explicitly into parody<sup>548</sup> and demonstrates the necessity of intertextuality to determine parody's nature. Without the context that intertextuality provides, parody cannot be seen by the reader. In Éric Chevillard's '*autofictif*' project, intertextuality is indeed key to understanding the project, as well as each individual fragment.

Chevillard's use of parody within an autofictional text gives a new dimension to the ludic nature within autofiction. This is only one strand of Chevillard's ludic project, however. Chevillard uses both narratological and lexical choices in order to pursue the ludic within his texts. Ludic devices can be seen particularly in the choice of his poetry, lending Chevillard's texts a different form of media to parody. The fragmentary nature of Chevillard's autofiction coupled with the instability of the reader, author and narrator contract, as well as the ability of the author to change the original text, combine to produce the most unstable and therefore most radical autofiction looked at in this thesis.

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<sup>543</sup> Margaret A Rose, *Parody: ancient, modern, and post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 28.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>546</sup> Simon Dentith, *Parody* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

This chapter will focus on Chevillard's innovation in autofiction; I will first determine Éric Chevillard's autofictional stance within the '*autofictif*' project, before going on to discuss the autofictional parody at work in the project. Finally, I will focus specifically on the constructions of masculinity and femininity within his autofictional œuvre with particular reference to the creation of his own autofictional persona in a parody of autofiction.

## Blogs and the autofictional persona

Chevillard's fictional works have received some critical attention, including one volume from the journal *Roman 20-50* published on his fictional works, yet little critical attention has been given to his '*autofictif*' project despite its popularity and innovation in the field. Fülöp's article on his project focusses on the idea of the blog and text combination as constituting a 'blook' which transgresses both the idea of a blog and a book.<sup>549</sup> Chevillard has already used his fictional texts to play with the idea of authorial personae, blurring the distinction between his fictional and autofictional production.<sup>550</sup> Indeed the authorial presence in his fictional works, according to Riendeau, touches on the uncertainties in his texts.<sup>551</sup> As Chevillard points out in relation to his fictional texts:

En peignant un auteur dans le tableau, je gagne, me semble-t-il, une profondeur de champ supplémentaire. Ce personnage d'écrivain dissimule, parasite ou brouille en partie le motif romanesque, mais il se passe également des choses dans son dos. Mon propre statut s'en trouve du coup complexifié. Il est fluctuant, indéterminable.<sup>552</sup>

According to Chevillard, therefore, the contract between reader and author is broken when an authorial presence is introduced. For some autofictional theorists, this insertion into a fictional narrative introduces an autofictional narrative. Colonna for example, argues this in his case for 'autofiction spéculaire', yet I do not agree. Simply modelling a character after a facsimile of the author does not break the fictional contract between the author and the reader nor does it entail an autofictional mode of reading. Instead, the contract is only broken if there are indications that the narrator, author and main character are functionally related through a name, paratextual information, or referential information given in the text. For example, 'Chevillard,' signs his name at the end of each update on the blog, which creates a link between the character written by a first-person narrator and the author. Chevillard's autofictional construction is created partly through the official website he links to the '*autofictif*' project, through his first-person

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<sup>549</sup> Fülöp, 'The Blogosphere and the Gutenberg Galaxy and Other Impossible Oppositions: Éric Chevillard's *L'autofictif*', p. 40.

<sup>550</sup> Riendeau discusses the presence of authors (plural) in Chevillard's œuvre. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I have constituted Chevillard's authorial persona in *L'autofictif* as singular due to its links with the character and first-person narrator creating one entity comprised of three facets.

<sup>551</sup> Pascal Riendeau, '*Des leurres ou des hommes de paille. Entretien avec Éric Chevillard*' in *Dossier critique : L'œuvre posthume de Thomas Pilaster, Du hérisson, Démolir Nisard d'Éric Chevillard* ed. by Pascal Riendeau (Vimy: Société Roman 20-50, 2008), pp. 11–22 (p. 12).

<sup>552</sup> Ibid., pp. 11–12.



narrator and to referential information that peppers his texts, such as places and events occurring in his personal life. Autofictional constructions of the author often play upon the forewords of their texts to provide their readers with links to bind the narrator, character and author together, which is a quintessentially Doubrovskian endeavour. The very nature of autofiction will always result in an unreliable narrator and author due to the autofictional game; the basis of autofiction is rooted in playing with the boundaries both of autobiography and of fiction.

Whilst the parodic qualities of Chevillard's autofiction are clear, Chevillard's originality in autofiction can also be seen in the use of different media within an ostensibly literary genre. Although autofiction's origins are based in literary texts, Montémont amongst others has suggested that the introduction of photography within an autofictional text has particular benefits for the competing claims of referentiality and fictionality within the genre.<sup>553</sup> Through adding photography into a literary genre tension is added to the text, giving autofiction further sources of stress to exploit. Furthermore, explicitly breaking the walls of the literary text gives the genre new ways to access referential and fictional spheres at the same time which is amplified when the Internet is included. Through social media and blogging, the autofictional persona can access both the referential and fictional sphere both strengthening and weakening the position of the persona. Thus Chevillard's autofictional persona, through blogging, is performing his persona in both text and social media at the same time. This extension of autofiction, with an emphasis on the autofictional persona's construction outside the boundaries of the text has implications for introducing many types of media into autofiction. Chevillard's autofictional persona can thus be seen as existing in an extra-textual reality, accessing fictional and referential spheres in a new way to other authors studied in this thesis.

Pierre Jourde is a particular critic of autofiction, lampooning the genre and using Christine Angot as a specific example of autofiction. Jourde has criticised Angot for using literature as a way to make money, focussing on the commercialisation of autofiction.<sup>554</sup> Chevillard's commercialisation of the '*autofictif*' project can in some way be seen as a response to this criticism. Of course, as Chevillard is parodying autofiction, he is inevitably creating it. As can be seen from the following quotation, his character construction is typical of the genre. Chevillard advises, '[j]e me considère là à

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<sup>553</sup> Montémont, 'Beyond Autobiography', p. 39.

<sup>554</sup> Pierre Jourde, *C'est la culture qu'on assassine* (Paris: Balland, 2011), p. 208.

mon tour, comme un personnage, je bascule entièrement dans mes univers de fiction où se rencontre aussi, non moins chimérique peut-être, le réel'.<sup>555</sup> Chevillard's first-person narrator is considered to be a character, effectively inserting his character into autofiction. The statement is reminiscent of Barthes' infamous quotation at the start of his autobiographical text,<sup>556</sup> as has previously been noted in the construction of Delaume and Vilain's autofictional texts, further reinforcing the status of his autofiction. Despite the inherent unreliability of the author, other paratextual information such as the title of the project suggests an autofictional dimension. It is striking that of all the authors discussed in this corpus, Chevillard is the only author to have used a derivative of autofiction in the title of a published work. '*Autofictif*', as a title, is also remarkably ambiguous given that it could be used as the name of the main character (the first-person narrator and main character do not have a name in the published texts) or more generally simply designate the project. Chevillard's character in the '*autofictif*' series has been remarked upon by Pascal Riendeau as, '[u]n personnage protéiforme qui déjoue les repères traditionnels du réel et du fictionnel et la création d'un univers ludique où presque tout devient possible'.<sup>557</sup> As Riendeau points out, Chevillard's autofictional creation maintains a fragile balance between both a fictional construct and a construct of the author himself. The parodic nature of Chevillard's '*autofictif*' implies a greater level of danger in this fragile balancing act for the author, narrator and main character. At once creating and mocking autofiction, Chevillard runs the risk that his parody will be misunderstood. This danger becomes most clear when publishing on the blog due to the lack of foreword that is present in the book project. Chevillard's foreword raises many theoretical questions about the nature of his project and the difficulty of ascribing a genre to it. He writes: '[m]on identité de diariste est ici fluctuante, trompeuse, protéiforme, raison pour laquelle je n'ai pas renoncé au titre d'origine, somme toute assez pertinent pour nommer cette entreprise'.<sup>558</sup> As Brochen points out, this does not create a contradiction between a diary and the autofictional project.<sup>559</sup> Instead, this points to attempts to make his

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<sup>555</sup> Pierre Jourde, *La littérature sans estomac* (Paris: Pocket, 2003), p. 8.

<sup>556</sup> Barthes, p. 5.

<sup>557</sup> Pascal Riendeau, 'L'aphorisme comme art du détour ou comment Éric Chevillard est devenu *L'autofictif*', p. 42.

<sup>558</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 8.

<sup>559</sup> Vanessa Brochen, 'L'autofiction chevillardienne : Parodie ou redéfinition?' (Unpublished Masters thesis, Université Paris Sorbonne IV, 2012), p. 46 <[http://www.eric-chevillard.net/pdf/travaux/l\\_autofiction\\_chevillardienne.pdf](http://www.eric-chevillard.net/pdf/travaux/l_autofiction_chevillardienne.pdf)> [accessed 04 March 2015].

autofictional identity more unstable. His unstable autofictional identity is therefore rendered more ambiguous by the question of genre in the text. The autofictional identity is, on the other hand, made more concrete by Chevillard later in the text. He writes:

Parfois je m'assieds, le crayon à la main, mais je n'ai pas envie de faire du Chevillard encore ; j'attends donc qu'il se laisse d'attendre ; c'est alors tantôt du Montaigne qui me vient, tantôt du Proust, du Borges ou du Nabokov ; à la fin, tout de même, ma vanité d'auteur reprend le dessus et je signe ces pages de mon nom.<sup>560</sup>

The creation of his autofictional character depends on the use of his name to sign his entries on the blog, and to signify authorship of his texts. In this way, the character of Chevillard is created by and linked with his authorial persona. Both the blog and the written text are peppered with references to writing in a further attempt to link the autofictional persona together.

One of the most unusual developments that occur in the series, however, concerns the introduction of a new character in *L'autofictif prend un coach*. Two recurring characters have previously been added into Chevillard's 'autofictif' project through the birth of his two children, Agathe and Suzie, with very few other characters introduced. No mention is ever made, for example, of his children's mother. His children are given autofictional personae and both of them are introduced to the narrative through the same type of fragment. Chevillard wrote at the time of Agathe's birth, 'Agathe | 47cm | 2kg 800'.<sup>561</sup> A similar fragment was created for the birth of his other child, Suzie with: 'Suzie | 3 kg 180 | 48cm'.<sup>562</sup> For both children, the information is presented as if it were factual information given on a birth announcement. His first-person narrator expresses no emotion about the births, nor does he give any other fragmentary pieces of information. The reader is simply expected to deduce that they relate to his children. In this way, Chevillard can be seen to be employing the private sphere in the same way as Delaume's creation of the private sphere. With no mention of the children's mother, the latter is entirely effaced from the narrative yet clearly exists in an extra-textual reality. Whilst small details about both children begin to appear in the texts, the reader is clear that the children's personae do not constitute fully developed characters.

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<sup>560</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 81.

<sup>561</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 163.

<sup>562</sup> Éric Chevillard, *L'autofictif père et fils : Journal 2009-2010* (Talence: L'Arbre Vengeur, 2011), p. 243.

In stark contrast, a split in the autofictional persona occurs in *L'autofictif prend un coach*,<sup>563</sup> a new phenomenon in the 'autofictif' project. A clue can be gleaned from the title, although the title uses 'coach' giving a particularly ambiguous meaning as 'coach' can mean either a bus or a lifestyle coach. This lifestyle coach is a projection of Chevillard's construction and is given no first name. She is announced to the reader as a type of writing fairy who will cause him to write better texts; the impression of fictionality is given credence by Chevillard through his use of the word 'fée' in relation to her. The 'writing fairy' is an adaptation of a Muse and as such is an offshoot of Chevillard's authorial character. Zajko writes that, '[h]arnessing the power of a mythical name might be a means of legitimising an otherwise disreputable project, or invoking a genealogy for an innovative claim'.<sup>564</sup> Through the use of the 'writing fairy', Chevillard invokes the Muse to legitimise his autofictional splitting of the self. Attempts at legitimisation of autofiction are common amongst other autofictional authors, as has been seen in previous chapters, and Chevillard's use of the Muse corresponds to the autofictional stereotype. In a highly unusual move, however, the fairy communicates with Chevillard in the same fragment and her female gender becomes clear. Chevillard is not the only autofictional writer to split his self into more than one section, or the only author in this corpus to do so. Chloé Delaume, as discussed in the previous chapter, also splits her autofictional construction into different characters and both Delaume and Chevillard fabricate a different gendered self,<sup>565</sup> creating dissonance between the sex and gender of the two constructions.

Chevillard's writing coach, 'la fée,' has been cast unproblematically as a female character, but now I would like to question the extent to which this character performs any gender role at all, and whether this lack of performativity contributes in any meaningful way to the autofictional construction. From the title *L'autofictif prend un coach*, Chevillard emphasises the dominant position of the 'autofictif' character; it is the 'autofictif' who takes the coach; there is no parity established and his agency over the secondary character is unquestioned. Yet the coach is paradoxically in power and has agency over the 'autofictif', as coaches teach students how to write, amongst other tasks. The coach can also be seen as a parodic statement on the status of coaches in contemporary French society and their fragile status therein. Of course, coaches are both

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<sup>563</sup> Éric Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach : Journal 2010-2011* (Talence: L'Arbre Vengeur, 2012).

<sup>564</sup> Vanda Zajko, 'Women and Greek Myth' in *A Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* ed. by Roger Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 387–406 (p. 398).

<sup>565</sup> Delaume constructs 'Charlie Orphan' as discussed in the previous chapter.

paradoxically in power and in the power of their clients. From the beginning, an uneasy relationship has been formed within the power dynamics of Chevillard's autofiction. The fairy, according to *Larousse*, can only ever be 'de sexe féminin'<sup>566</sup> which raises an interesting hierarchical problem for Chevillard. When she is introduced, the first-person narrator makes clear the history of fairies in fairy-tales. He writes:

On ne sera pas donc surpris – car, bien sûr, j'accepte les offres de services de ma fée avec empressement, avec reconnaissance – si, bientôt, la pauvre citrouille sur laquelle, tel un ours sur un ballon, j'essaie de progresser dans la carrière des Lettres se change en un carrosse doré, mené à grande vitesse par quatre chevaux blancs.<sup>567</sup>

In introducing the writing coach in such a way as to emphasise the 'fairy-like' nature, Chevillard reminds the reader of the power of fairies used in children's tales, where magic is employed for mystical purposes, such as turning a pumpkin into a golden carriage or to make a bear balance on a ball. The power of the writing coach has instantly been undermined due to her association with marginal characters. To use a character with marginal agency therefore creates an interesting juxtaposition between the main character and the split self. 'La fée' is relegated from a position of agency and of power to one of secondary influence. There is one occasion early in the autofictional persona's development, however, when the coach persuades him to accept invitations for literary events. Chevillard writes, '[e]t elle m'oblige, en guise d'exercice, à accepter toutes les propositions qui me seront faites cette semaine. C'est ainsi que l'on me verra samedi au 38<sup>e</sup> Festival du marque-page de Melay-en-Mauges'.<sup>568</sup> At first glance, this seems to be the coach gaining power over the '*autofictif*' yet the power is not as significant as it first appears. There is no such place in France as Melay-en-Mauges, and by extension, there is therefore no festival of book-marks there, ridiculing the French literary prize-giving scene. This in turn reduces any power that the writing coach may present, and the power of the '*autofictif*', and by extension masculine power, is reasserted.

The writing fairy's lack of agency is most apparent when seen with the fragment that closes the writing fairy's interventions in the text. As a character, the coach is relatively short-lived. There are interventions by her from 13<sup>th</sup> April 2011 until

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<sup>566</sup> 'Definitions: Fée - French Dictionary Larousse'

<<http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/french/f%c3%a9e/33156?q=f%c3%a9e#33080>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>567</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, p. 174.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

17<sup>th</sup> September 2011, although the entries are sporadic and the first person narrator ends with a denunciation. Her femininity is emphasised in the last fragment of the book as Chevillard depicts her almost saint-like behaviour, creating a parody of her. Chevillard writes:

Puis je me sépare de mon coach. Je suis venu à bout de sa patience. J'ai usé son enthousiasme. Je lui ai si clairement représenté la vanité de toute ambition, la vacuité du monde où elle voulait me voir triompher, la médiocrité de son succès, qu'elle envisage à présent de distribuer ses biens aux pauvres et de se retirer dans un ermitage, vêtue d'un seul drap blanc, avec sous le bras un pain dont elle détachera quelquefois une miette, quand un rayon de soleil pénétrant par le carreau fera danser la poussière dans sa cellule – poussières que nous sommes, qui dansons cependant – et que, l'âme émue de reconnaissance, le cœur accordé à la simplicité des choses, elle voudra s'offrir un festin.<sup>569</sup>

This highly descriptive and imaginative passage in which Chevillard separates from the Muse is one of the longer passages and it is ironic that in this deeply symbolic fragment, Chevillard affirms that he no longer needs her due to the vanity of ambition. In previous discussions of the writing coach as a character, the author has given the coach some form of agency and the writing coach is associated with language and power. Here the author has sanctified the coach, and so relegated her to the position of other. The coach has been stripped of her clothes and food, and has been left entirely without power; she is to go into a retreat. Imagery in the fragment becomes religious in nature, lending the character further martyr-like qualities. The final image is that of a martyred woman, a woman devoid of power and agency. As such, Chevillard's final act in this text is to reassert the masculine power and agency that has been undermined by the presence of the writing coach. In the traditional confines of autobiography, fictional characters are expunged from the narrative, yet in this text, the fairy is initially celebrated for her possibilities. Although the character is then deleted, the first-person narrator's choice of new character reveals a more autofictional character than his own reading of *L'autofictif* suggests. His character's autofictional nature is further enhanced through the use of fragments, giving the character a more disjointed presence.

One of the ways in which Chevillard seeks to disrupt autofiction is through the use of fragments. Fragments have been used in other autofictional endeavours, such as those discussed in the previous chapter on Chloé Delaume. Through the use of

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<sup>569</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, pp. 289–290.

fragments, Chevillard is drawing on a long tradition of fragmentary writing from both autobiography and fiction. Roland Barthes with *Roland Barthes*, George Perec with *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, and Natalie Sarraute with *Enfance*, have all used fragments within the confines of autobiography to give a new perspective to the traditions of autobiography. Indeed as Sheringham remarks in relation to Robbe-Grillet, fragments can signal an approach to newness that is unwarranted. He writes that the, 'conspicuous air of newness such devices betray a strong sense of the possible impropriety of doing Autobiography, at least in the old way, the sense of breaking a taboo and the desire to advertise a difference.'<sup>570</sup> Yet whilst fragmentary writing has been a feature of autobiographical writing, it is also a feature of fictional writing.<sup>571</sup> In drawing from both fictional and autobiographical traditions, Chevillard's texts become more bound in the struggle for autofiction's specificity. But where others have used fragmentation as a device within autofiction, Chevillard's originality lies both in his consistent use of fragmentation in the '*autofictif*' project as well as his parodic autofiction.

Chevillard's use of autofiction extends further, however, becoming entirely dependent on fragmentation and aphorism. As Baudrillard states, '[d]ans l'aphorisme, dans le fragment, il y a la volonté de dégraisser au maximum, on ne saisit plus alors les mêmes choses, les objets se transforment quand on les voit dans le détail, dans une sorte de vide elliptique'.<sup>572</sup> Chevillard's parodic autofiction is partially constructed on the basis of small interventions in the process of autofiction. Baudrillard further goes on to discuss the nature of aphoristic writing which can be usefully applied to Chevillard's constructions. He writes:

Il ne s'agit pas d'y mettre un terme moral, ou de retrouver une mesure, il s'agit de trouver une règle du jeu. Le jeu est limité, c'est un univers fini, il est défini par la règle. En dehors, rien ne se règle sur le jeu, et à l'intérieur tout est soumis à cette règle. L'espace d'un jeu, c'est une singularité qui n'a d'autre règle que la sienne.<sup>573</sup>

By participating in the game of aphoristic writing, Chevillard is creating a different type of autofiction, and using multiple forms of narrative whilst staying within a precise set of rules.

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<sup>570</sup> Michael Sheringham, 'Ego Redux? Strategies in New French Autobiography' *Dalhousie French Studies*, 17 (1989), pp. 27–35, (p. 28).

<sup>571</sup> Riendeau, 'L'aphorisme comme art du détour ou comment Éric Chevillard est devenu *L'autofictif*', p. 40.

<sup>572</sup> Jean Baudrillard and François L'Yvonnet, *D'un fragment l'autre : Entretiens avec François L'Yvonnet* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2003), p. 36.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

In the project, each fragment is usually part of a three part entry in the blog, although the fragments can be related to the others or stand-alone. Riendeau's article entitled, 'L'aphorisme comme art du détour ou comment Éric Chevillard est devenu *L'autofictif*' raises some interesting points on the art of the aphorism and the fragment in Chevillard's project. For Riendeau states that:

Dans la série *L'autofictif*, les aphorismes ne constituent qu'un élément de l'écriture fragmentaire. Ce qui reste plus constant cependant, c'est l'écriture ou le style aphoristique que Chevillard adopte : concision et précision de la pensée sens de la formule bien tournée, ou encore une construction rhétorique qui se rapproche du syllogisme.<sup>574</sup>

Chevillard does protest that his texts are not stylistic exercises, such as in the first book of the '*autofictif*' series when he states, '[l]e prochain qui prétend que mes livres sont des exercices de style, je jure que je lui montre sur-le-champ quel raffiné barbare je suis spontanément'.<sup>575</sup> Yet this protestation from the first-person narrator is not credible. Fragments and aphorisms, as Riendeau points out, give a concise and precise meaning to a thought and are inherently stylistic devices. Chevillard's stylistic uses of autofiction are given further weight with the introduction of his poetry. In a fragment posted only two days after the above quotation, Chevillard introduces the following fragment:

je  
n'écris  
jamais  
de  
vers  
qu'à  
la  
lueur  
de  
l'éclair<sup>576</sup>

The '*autofictif*' project is littered with poetry and prior to this fragment, there have been five previous stanzas of poetry on the blog. In the quotation above, the form of the stanza creates the fork of lightning mirroring the lightning discussed in the fragment, inextricably linking the form to the content. Furthermore, the content is obviously factually incorrect and it could be that the content is a reference to the contemporary

<sup>574</sup> Riendeau, 'L'aphorisme comme art du détour ou comment Éric Chevillard est devenu *L'autofictif*', p. 40.

<sup>575</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 40.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid., p. 42.



nature of blogging, as blogging has become a way of quickly responding to current events. Taken together (the original statement and the fragment of poetry), the two fragments provide an insight into the unreliability of the autofictional persona. Of course, as the two fragments are set in a parodic autofiction, there is doubt inherent in the credibility of the first-person narrator from the beginning, giving the ‘*autofictif*’ project a more radical and unstable vision of autofiction than previously seen in this thesis. The credibility of the autofictional persona is entirely crucial in this thesis’s conception of autofiction. Without the autofictional persona acting as a lynch-pin in the autofictional text, autofiction cannot be seen to exist. As the autofictional persona’s voice is undermined, the contract undertaken between the reader and the author is also undermined. Chevillard’s autofictional persona, thus, creates a sense of instability that has already been introduced to the text through the parody of autofiction.

Despite the rules that appear to underpin Chevillard’s autofictional œuvre, they are not inviolate. One of the most striking features is that the blog is nearly always updated every day, and that three fragments will usually appear in the same entry. There are a few exceptions to this rule however, one of which occurs in *L’autofictif voit une loutre*. Chevillard explicitly references the break with a plea to buy the original *L’autofictif*. He writes, ‘[I]’autofictif écœuré se taira jusqu’au 29 avril. On profitera de son silence pour relire en hochant la tête le premier volume de ce journal loyalement acquis en librairie’.<sup>577</sup> The first-person narrator gives a plausible reason for the lack of updates to follow, giving himself the title of ‘*autofictif*’. Not only is Chevillard explicitly expressing a link between the main character and the first-person narrator by using ‘*autofictif*’ as the subject in the sentence, he is also encouraging those who read his blog to change from the text on the blog page to the text in a book. Following the break, the reader may expect some continuation of this thought, and yet none occurs. In fact, the next fragment is as follows:

*Enculé ! Va te faire enculer !* La sodomie est le grand fantasme de l’époque qui se trahit jusque dans l’injure. On finirait par croire que l’on ne vit que pour ça, cet unique objectif, ce but ultime, la raison et la fin de toutes nos actions, que tous les chemins y mènent plus sûrement qu’à Rome et que l’anus est bien le centre de la cible.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>577</sup> Éric Chevillard, *L’autofictif voit une loutre : Journal 2008-2009* (Talence: L’Arbre Vengeur, 2010), p. 164.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

No mention is made of the autofictional persona in this fragment after the break. Chevillard is also drawing attention to the commercial aspect of his '*autofictif*' project, drawing a comparison between the two competing obsessions of money and sex in contemporary texts. At the same time, Chevillard is mocking the print reader who has purchased his text, and he is focussing on the lapse in time since he last updated the blog, playing with the reader's expectations.

Within Chevillard's '*autofictif*' project, the first-person narrator often plays with readers' expectations. The performance of his autofictional persona is put under threat every time this occurs due to the instability in the reader contract. Through using parody as a ludic device in his autofiction, Chevillard has already questioned the nature of autofiction. With each subsequent contrary intervention by his autofictional persona, Chevillard undermines the performance and credibility of his autofictional persona in an extra-textual reality. Chevillard creates an unreliable narrator, but he also has a tendency to use established phrases and create different logical outcomes to these phrases. This game is present in previous texts of the '*autofictif*' project, but comes to the fore in *L'autofictif prend un coach*. On the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2010, Chevillard published:

Ce *comique* voudrait bien être sérieux, là, cinq minutes. Mais rien à faire, qu'il salue aimablement la boulangère, qu'il ouvre son parapluie ou morde dans son sandwich, chacun de ses gestes, chacune de ses expressions prêtent à rire. Il nous a habitués à y voir la mimique d'un expressionnisme burlesque. Il embrasse comiquement. Il supplie comiquement. Il souffre comiquement. Et son corps décomposer comiquement. On ne voit décidément pas comment ce joyeux drille pourrait prétendre au tragique d'une destinée humaine.<sup>579</sup>

In this fragment, a series of simply constructed phrases is followed by a rupture in sentence structure with the sudden appearance of a decomposing body. Each sentence has been written in the same way with the comic as the subject of each verb until his death. The fragment's grammatical arrangement then radically changes putting his body as the subject in a passive form. Finally, the specificity of his comic changes into a generic human being and the habitual nature of being, fundamentally changing the nature of the fragment. This is not the only time that a constructed fragment is suddenly re-ordered at the last moment. Chevillard often discusses the case of widows living longer than their husbands, and in this instance, the conclusion is somewhat surprising and far-fetched. He writes:

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<sup>579</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, p. 8.

La population des maisons de retraite est presque exclusivement féminine. On compte dix vieilles pour un vieux. La disproportion est flagrante, douloureuse, angoissante, y compris pour ces femmes qui se retrouvent soudain dans un monde sans hommes. Puisque décidément elles vivent beaucoup plus longtemps que nous, je suggère que les femmes naissent désormais dix ans avant les hommes ; ainsi le rapport entre les sexes s'équilibrera *in fine* dans les hospices.<sup>580</sup>

By introducing a fact that purports to be common knowledge, Chevillard extends the logical extent to which the fact can be supposed to be true. The argument is taken to a pseudo-logical conclusion, and extended beyond all reasonable expectation. Through the subversion of expectation in phrases, Chevillard is pursuing a complex language game within autofiction designed to disrupt classification of his project. Through the use of parody, autofiction in Chevillard's project creates ludic representations of language, defying definition.

Classification of the project becomes more difficult given that his blog defies categorisation. Further, his '*autofictif*' project differs in a significant way from other autofictional writers discussed in this thesis, due to the re-publication of his text from the blog to a physical book, described as a 'blook' by Fülöp.<sup>581</sup> As Thérenty writes, '[l]e passage d'Internet au livre implique une réception différente de l'œuvre dont les deux écrivains ont bien conscience. Du côté du lecteur, s'opère notamment le passage d'une lecture de flux à une logique de lecture continue, dense, récapitulative, méditative'.<sup>582</sup> Of course, the change in medium also changes the type of reader as well as the reception. The traditional frame of the text, the very physicality of the text, becomes linked to an ethereal blog. Chevillard's blog, however, also links back to the traditional book as a work constructed and then delivered to the reader, creating an interesting and innovative interplay between the two forms.

One of the ways in which this interplay can be seen is through Chevillard's use of intertextual material. As has been seen in previous chapters, particularly in the case of Chloé Delaume, intertextuality is a key element in autofictional writing. Intertextuality, as mentioned in previous chapters of this thesis, breaks the narration of the text by expanding the boundaries of the reader. According to Hughes, '[t]he impact, in and on a

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<sup>580</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif voit une loutre*, p. 38.

<sup>581</sup> Fülöp, 'The Blogosphere and the Gutenberg Galaxy and Other Impossible Oppositions: Éric Chevillard's *L'Autofictif*', p. 40.

<sup>582</sup> Thérenty, 'L'effet-blog en littérature', *Les blogs : Écritures d'un nouveau genre*, ed. by Christèle Couleau and Pascale Hellégouarc'h (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), pp. 53–64 (p. 57).

narrative entity, of the interferential (voice of the) Other may be destabilizing, unsettling, invasive. It can generate reactions and relations of animus, conflict, and rejection'.<sup>583</sup> The reader is forced to adjust to new information from cultural knowledge, or from other texts. Chevillard's transposition from blog to literary text can be seen as one of the key elements behind the inclusion of so many different types of intertextual references in his texts. As Brochen notes, parody is inherently an issue of intertextuality.<sup>584</sup> Intertextual references take many forms in Chevillard, and vary from 'insider knowledge' references, to contemporary references, to evocations of myth. This 'insider knowledge' reference is perhaps best illustrated by Michel Houellebecq on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2010.<sup>585</sup> Chevillard writes, 'Houellebecq du toucan qui fait tout ce boucan ?'<sup>586</sup> Of course, the literal meaning of the sentence can be perfectly understood as a toucan that makes a lot of noise.<sup>587</sup> Yet the use of the author Houellebecq also gives the reader a second reading wherein the author is being criticised. In 2010, Houellebecq published *La Carte et le Territoire* and was accused of plagiarism to which he mounted an attack based on the use of material on artistic merit.<sup>588</sup> In the fragment, there is a homophonic pun on the words 'boucan' and 'bouquin', which implicitly draws attention to Houellebecq's plagiarism. This double meaning can only occur when the reader is not only versed in the same references as the writer, but also when the reference is punctual. Through virtue of the blog, the reference is punctual, but as the texts are published, the references can be lost, or become clichés very quickly. This punctuality can also be crucial in relating to common cultural knowledge. For example, there are references to the paedophilia scandal that has engulfed the Catholic Church. On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2011:

L'élargissement des pédophiles ayant accompli leur peine fait naître une inquiétude légitime chez les parents de jeunes enfants. D'un autre côté, on ne peut refuser la liberté à un criminel parvenu au terme de sa condamnation. La société aurait pourtant bien un moyen de se prémunir contre la récidive. Il suffirait qu'un signe désigne ces pédophiles à notre vigilance. Obligeons-les par exemple à porter une soutane.<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>583</sup> Hughes, 'Recycling and Repetition in Recent French *Autofiction*', p. 566.

<sup>584</sup> Brochen, p. 71.

<sup>585</sup> Vincent Glad, 'Houellebecq, la possibilité d'un plagiat', *www.slate.fr*, 4 September 2010, <<http://www.slate.fr/story/26745/wikipedia-plagiat-michel-houellebecq-carte-territoire>> [accessed 04 March 2015]. The story broke on 2 September 2010.

<sup>586</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, p. 14.

<sup>587</sup> Despite the absurdity of this statement in a literal sense, it is entirely plausible within the context of Chevillard's previous pronouncements about animals.

<sup>588</sup> Glad.

<sup>589</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, p. 135.

Common cultural knowledge is evoked and each sentence of the fragment delivers an injunction to society about paedophiles as a barometer of public opinion. Moreover the injection of the Catholic Church ending the fragment provides a different, unexpected and humorous ending to it. These unexpected references are highly topical at the moment of writing or reading them on the blog, and yet when the experience is transferred onto a text, they serve a more complex function. As has just been mentioned, one of the effects of intertextuality is to disrupt the text. Whilst this remains true on a blog, the reader is also only reading three new fragments in the case of Chevillard. When this experience is transferred onto the text, the effect of intertextuality is magnified due to the reference usually having lost its topicality and the more concentrated and dense reading that the reading of a book implies.<sup>590</sup>

Intertextual references take many forms in the ‘*autofictif*’ project. Éric Chevillard is the only writer in this corpus to mention politics explicitly, in particular the former President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy. Throughout the texts, Sarkozy is often ironically referred to as ‘notre souverain’ and the references are frequently followed with remarks relating to *La Princesse de Clèves*.<sup>591</sup> The ability to insert the authorial figure into a discussion of politics is perhaps something characteristic to the form of the blog, and provides a snapshot image of contemporary society. Sarkozy is not the only politician to be mentioned as President Obama and the former Prime Minister of France, de Villepin, are also discussed. The most illuminating section, however, are the remarks upon the death of Osama bin Laden which are explicitly tied into the autofictional narrative. His death is alluded to in *L’autofictif prend un coach* by a child. Bin Laden is called the ‘grand, méchant loup’<sup>592</sup> who has been killed in Pakistan. The fragment only makes sense when the context is already known; the text divides readers from the ‘knowing’ and the ‘unknowing’. Chevillard acknowledges the death of bin Laden in the first fragment of 4<sup>th</sup> May 2011 but goes on to mention autofiction in the fragment directly following. He writes:

La littérature est un peu près muette en ce qui concerne le concombre de mer. Celui-ci ne lui donne pas prise. Il a trouvé moyen, en réduisant son

<sup>590</sup> Thérenty, ‘L’effet-blog en littérature’, p. 57.

<sup>591</sup> Le Monde, ‘La Princesse de Clèves’ répond à Nicolas Sarkozy’, [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr), 17 February 2009, <[http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/video/2009/02/17/la-princesse-de-cleves-repond-a-nicolas-sarkozy\\_1156337\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/video/2009/02/17/la-princesse-de-cleves-repond-a-nicolas-sarkozy_1156337_823448.html)> [accessed 04 March 2015]. The text has become a rallying point for anti-Sarkozy protestors following Sarkozy’s remarks about the utility of studying the text for administrators. It has also become a symbol of the perceived anti-intellectualism of President Sarkozy’s agenda.

<sup>592</sup> Chevillard, *L’autofictif prend un coach*, p. 193.

être aux plus élémentaires fonctions organiques, en cédant pour tout le reste aux caprices des courants, de décourager la plume sagace de l'écrivain et sa tentative de mettre le monde en couple réglée. Il ne sera jamais un personnage ni un sujet. On ne le trouvera pas scandaleusement mêlé au ragot de l'autofiction.<sup>593</sup>

Again, if the reader is part of the 'knowing' group, the reference to sea-cucumbers is a reference to how bin Laden was buried.<sup>594</sup> Due to the fragment's emphasis on prior knowledge which would be more apparent to blog readers, than to those reading a text many months after the event, the different effects of intertextuality can be seen. As Orr writes,

In terms of information range, speed of access and ease of update, electronic media outstrip the reach of print forms. Such democratic and instantaneous production, reproduction, dissemination and reception this make potentially for global dialogue, and for expansion of knowledge both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>595</sup>

The expansion of knowledge can perhaps be achieved in electronic media, although Orr fails to take into account the lack of traditional methods of promotion of new material. Indeed, without promotion this expansion of knowledge cannot exist nor can global dialogue be enacted, rendering her argument over-simplistic and optimistic. Despite this, the information range is indeed magnified entailing a different reading experience for blog and print readers. Chevillard's '*autofictif*' project, therefore, functions in two different media spheres imparting different connections to different readers. In this way, readers of the printed version may be excluded from references that may be specific to the readers of the blog or vice versa.

One of the few writers Chevillard often references is Alexandre Jardin. Each time he publishes a new book, Chevillard comments upon the new text. Autofiction as a space for malicious gossip appears particularly relevant in connection with Jardin. When asked why his blog so often mentions Jardin, Chevillard replied, '[c]e qu'il écrit est si objectivement nul et son succès pourtant si insolent qu'il incarne à lui seul le malentendu actuel touchant la littérature'.<sup>596</sup> Chevillard offers no definitive definition of what he believes literature to be, and simply seems to be against the publishing market,

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>594</sup> Le Monde, 'Oussama Ben Laden tué au Pakistan et enseveli en mer', [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2011/05/02/oussama-ben-laden-est-mort-au-pakistan_1515449_3222.html), 5 February 2011, <[http://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2011/05/02/oussama-ben-laden-est-mort-au-pakistan\\_1515449\\_3222.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2011/05/02/oussama-ben-laden-est-mort-au-pakistan_1515449_3222.html)> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>595</sup> Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 49.

<sup>596</sup> Riendeau, '*Des leurres ou des hommes de paille. Entretien avec Éric Chevillard*', p. 13.

a considerably ironic stance to take when he published the formerly free blog text in that market. Furthermore, autofiction's success within marketing appears to be one of the reasons why Chevillard has chosen to write the '*autofictif*' project. Despite his apparent disgust with Jardin, the frequent mentions of Jardin by Chevillard are often punctuated by mentions of his own texts. The Goncourt is particularly singled out for attention in each autofictional text, despite his derision of literary prizes in *L'autofictif prend un coach*, discussed earlier in this chapter, and appears to be one of the common strands of the '*autofictif*' project. Chevillard often mentions his own texts such as *Sans l'orang-outan* which is referenced throughout *L'autofictif* and creates an understanding of Chevillard the author. These references strengthen the autofictional persona's performance and tie the persona to known extra-textual information as well as an extra-textual reality. Although Chevillard is parodying autofiction, his autofictional persona is crucial in understanding the genre. Thus extra-textual references that help to create and perform his autofictional persona are necessary in order for his autofiction to function as such.

## Banality and autofiction

Chevillard's '*autofictif*' project uses parody as a device for injecting comedy into the everyday, and it is precisely the perceived banality of autofiction that Chevillard is seeking to disrupt. In this section I intend to show that Chevillard's rejection of classification paradoxically creates a new level of continuity through the project with some distinguishing features such as the banal beginning of each text, the figure of a fat single man in Chevillard's poetry, and the theme of animals which runs through every text of Chevillard's, whether fictional or autofictional.

As stated earlier, the blog entries and the published text begin on 18<sup>th</sup> September of each year, and are usually composed of three fragments.<sup>597</sup> Every publication in the '*autofictif*' project begins with a discussion of the blades of grass on the lawn.

Chevillard writes, (given in chronological order):

J'ai compté 807 brins d'herbe, puis je me suis arrêté. La pelouse était vaste encore.<sup>598</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> There is also a spin-off blog from the 807 blades of grass entitled: <<http://les807.blogspot.co.uk/>> [accessed 04 March 2015].

<sup>598</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 9.

J'ai repris le décompte des brins d'herbe de mon jardin, car je veux connaître le monde et il faut bien commencer. Mais où en étais-je ? Impossible de me le rappeler. Je suis donc reparti du premier. Parvenu à 807, un peu las, je me suis arrêté. La pelouse était vaste encore.<sup>599</sup>

... 804...805... 806...807... j'en étais là du dénombrement rigoureux des brins d'herbe de ma pelouse quand je fus pris d'un doute rétrospectif concernant le troisième qui croît en bordure de celle-ci, légèrement décalé, et que j'avais eu tort peut-être de tenir pour ma propriété. La consultation en urgence du cadastre me confirma dans mes droits, mais quant à mon arpentage : tout est à refaire.<sup>600</sup>

...805... 806... 807... puis j'ai eu peur, j'ai reculé... le huit cent huitième brin d'herbe de ma pelouse m'a paru bizarrement contourné, menaçant, le genre de végétation qui abrite ou dissimule une mygale, un python, une panthère. Prudence. La jungle amazonienne aussi a commencé bien bas.<sup>601</sup>

*Tiens, papa, c'est pour toi*, me dit Agathe en me tendant un petit bouquet vert cueilli dans mon dos tandis que je me livrais, accroupi, au dénombrement annuel des brins d'herbe de ma pelouse. *Merci, ma chérie belle* – et j'arrachai sèchement le huit cent septième qui me chatouillait l'index pour lier sa gentille offrande.<sup>602</sup>

Each time, Chevillard does not go beyond counting the eight-hundred and seven blades of grass and each time there is an excuse given as to why he should stop there. The circular nature of counting the blades of grass – there is no end in sight to counting them on a vast lawn – is counteracted by the beginning of each new text. The fragment serves as a marker point for both the beginning of each new text, and a reminder of the continuous nature of the project. The aphoristic nature of the phrases also serves as a reminder in Chevillard's language to use as many different forms as possible so as to resist categorisation. Furthermore, the banality of the action reinforces Chevillard's stated stance on autofiction: that it is the literature of the trivial. Chevillard's ludic enterprise is thus at its most striking when trivial information is included in the narrative. Of course, as Chevillard has begun the 'autofictif' project as a parody, the triviality of his autofiction is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jourde argues in *La Littérature sans estomac* that:

<sup>599</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif voit une loutre*, p. 7.

<sup>600</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif père et fils*, p. 7.

<sup>601</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, p. 7.

<sup>602</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif croque un piment*, p. 7.



Le sexe, le vomi, le caca, c'est pour montrer, de même, qu'on ne triche pas, qu'on baigne dans le réel (mais qu'on en fait de la poésie). La syntaxe dépourvue de liens et de pauses, c'est pour montrer, de même, qu'on ne s'arrête pas à des vécilles et à des petites choses de réflexion, on ne coupe pas, on est en ligne directe avec l'inspiration, l'inconscient, tout le bazar.<sup>603</sup>

The banality and triviality that Chevillard is conveying through his discussion of the blades of grass appear to echo Jourde's denunciation of contemporary literature. Through the parody of trivia, Chevillard is seeking to widen the ludic field of enquiry and enhance autofiction's relationship with the ludic. Gascoigne's definition of the ludic is useful in order to understand the ways in which trivial pieces of information constitute part of the ludic space of enquiry in autofiction. The ludic text's dependence on 'experiment and artifice'<sup>604</sup> further depends on the ability to see the artifice. Through repeatedly invoking artificial and superficial elements of trivia within his autofiction, Chevillard's texts recreate a ludic space. Nor is this the only way in which Chevillard is parodying contemporary literature as this is also done through his poetry.

Poetry appears to be one way in which the author attempts to produce a link between his fragments, through using 'le gros célibataire'. This figure of the fat single man, a recurring secondary character, is present in much of the poetry in 2008 and a typical example can be found on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008 when he writes: 'quoi? j'ai changé ma manière | pas plus tard que l'année dernière | s'insurge le gros célibataire'.<sup>605</sup> The three line structure (reminiscent of the Japanese form of Haiku), brevity of the stanza and lack of capitalisation are consistent with the usual form of his poetry as is the subject matter. Masturbation, family, eating, marriage and cats are all subjects to have appeared in the poetry with 'le gros célibataire' but perhaps the most striking aspect of the poetry is its banality. The only strand that ties all these poetry fragments together appears to be the phrase, 'le gros célibataire', and stands for a stereotypical bachelor who does stereotypical and banal activities. In this case, Chevillard is using the bachelor to parody the triviality of subjects discussed in autofiction. A fragment from 7<sup>th</sup> September 2008 illustrates this perfectly. Chevillard writes, 'j'ai un rendez-vous, dit le gros célibataire | avec un air plein de mystère | une belle fille? une bonne affaire? | (une colonoscopie à l'hôpital Necker)'.<sup>606</sup> Again, as is often the case in Chevillard's autofictional texts,

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<sup>603</sup> Jourde, *La Littérature sans estomac*, p. 16.

<sup>604</sup> Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction*, p. 24.

<sup>605</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 176.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

humour and irony are imbedded within the text. Not only do the words appear to be chosen simply to rhyme with each other (this is true of nearly all the ‘gros célibataire’ poems), the first two suggestions are perfectly plausible and perfectly banal attempts to answer the question of who he has a date with. The third suggestion is presented as the correct answer to the mystery and yet it is also a humorous approach to the idea of a fat single man creating mystery about a meeting at the hospital for a colonoscopy. As can be seen from a comparison of the two examples, the most visible difference between the two is the addition of parenthesis in the second fragment – in fact this is the only time the poetry fragment increases in length throughout the five texts studied. Furthermore, a game is put in place with the final words of each line rhyming with one another. At first glance, the reader may suspect that the rhyming game will be present in each of the stanzas relating to ‘le gros célibataire’. There are, however, a few examples when this simple explanation fails such as on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2008 when, ‘épluche’, ‘faire’ and ‘taire’<sup>607</sup> are the three words at the end of the lines which obviously do not rhyme. A further example can be found on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2008 when, ‘facilement’, ‘célibataire’ and ‘frère’<sup>608</sup> are at the end of the lines or on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2010 with ‘terre’ ‘presque’ and ‘prière’.<sup>609</sup> Instead, I would suggest that Chevillard is again pursuing what I have called earlier the literature of the trivial. Chevillard discusses relationships in a trivial way, by focussing on anecdotes such as the fat single man going for a colonoscopy. Through the discussion of banality and triviality, Chevillard is parodying autofiction’s content. Furthermore, the re-occurrence of the man is also symptomatic of the nature of Chevillard’s project, as well as the counting of grass, which is to undermine, and to play with, the genre of autofiction. Jourde’s searing critique of Angot’s autofictions is perhaps useful here for a discussion of Chevillard’s poetry as Jourde denounces her lack of originality and repetition<sup>610</sup> which is exactly mirrored in *L’autofictif*. As Angot is one of the poster children for autofiction, it is not surprising that Chevillard would attempt to produce autofiction parodying her. Despite the change in subject matter from Angot’s more controversial topics, such as incest,<sup>611</sup> I will invoke Dentith’s definition of parody to suggest that Chevillard’s parody rests on repetition of the everyday and the trivial.

Throughout his book, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the*

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<sup>607</sup> Chevillard, *L’autofictif*, p. 129.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>609</sup> Chevillard, *L’autofictif prend un coach*, p. 48.

<sup>610</sup> Jourde, *La littérature sans estomac*, p. 86.

<sup>611</sup> See Arnaud Genon, *Autofiction : Pratiques et théories: Articles* (Mon Petit Éditeur, 2013), pp. 75–179, for a greater discussion of Christine Angot.

*Present*, Sheringham contends that the question of the everyday has been central to French culture over the last quarter of a century.<sup>612</sup> Further, he suggests that, '[t]he impulse to home in at the micro-level inspires a generic bricolage that reflects the everyday's resistance to codification and its connection with change as much as with stability'.<sup>613</sup> Therefore, despite, or perhaps because of the parody of Angot and others, the literature of the trivial reflects a resistance to categorisation in the '*autofictif*' project. Parodic autofiction in Chevillard's texts therefore reflects a wider strategy of anti-codification and deviation from the rules he has self-imposed, from autofiction.

One of the other strands running through the project of *L'autofictif* is the theme of animals, producing a banal and trivial identification with humanity and connecting his autofictional project together. Many different animals are represented throughout Chevillard's texts from seals, to dogs, to flies, and they are often mentioned in relation to humankind. Part of autofiction's specificity lies in its ability to bring together various media to create a ludic text. Although Chevillard does not use different media in the same way as other autofictional writers in this thesis, he does bring together different forms of texts. Chevillard's use of animals can be seen as part of a long tradition of the fable, bringing another generic strand into his autofiction. Chevillard remarked in an interview in 1993 (before the '*autofictif*' project had begun) that, '[I]es animaux sont pour moi des métaphores vivantes. J'en abuse un peu, c'est vrai. Mais j'ai toujours le sentiment qu'ils se moquent des hommes, que leurs activités parodient les nôtres. Ils m'offrent des petites fables toutes faites'.<sup>614</sup> Chevillard uses animals in a parody of humanity in the entirety of his œuvre. Animals are ever-present in *L'autofictif*, and in this project, although in only one instance are they mentioned in relation to writing. On 9<sup>th</sup> February 2010 Chevillard writes:

Mais comment font-ils? Pour ce qui me concerne, la page blanche est une invitation à tracer le mot tamanoir. S'il se refuse pourtant, j'y mets d'abord une fourmi – et ça ne rate jamais : il vient aussitôt sous ma plume.<sup>615</sup>

As Rabadi writes, Chevillard uses animals as a form of ludic digression<sup>616</sup> which helps to add to the sense of banality in this project. Further, Rabadi suggests that the animals

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<sup>612</sup> Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>614</sup> Éric Chevillard, and Richard Robert, 'Le monde selon Crab', [www.eric-chevillard.net](http://www.eric-chevillard.net), July 1993, <[http://www.eric-chevillard.net/e\\_lemondeseloncrab.php](http://www.eric-chevillard.net/e_lemondeseloncrab.php)> [accessed 24 June 2015]

<sup>615</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif père et fils*, p. 115.

themselves resist categorisation in his fictional texts. She states that, '[l]eur investissement créatif est proportionnel aux effets de résistance qu'ils mettent en œuvre face à la réalité'.<sup>617</sup> That the animals resist the effects of reality in his fiction adds another dimension to their presence in his autofictional project. The animals appear to be performing a primarily ludic function comprising of a multi-faceted character who personify the systemic lack of categorisation in *L'autofictif*. They straddle the juxtaposition through their identifiable trait, whilst at the same time adding little to the narrative structure.

The '*autofictif*' project can therefore be characterised by an overwhelming banality transforming the text from autofiction into parodic autofiction. Problematising autofiction gives Chevillard the freedom to play with the boundaries of the text, using the blog and more conventional novel format (through the book form of the project) to create a new form of autofiction. Yet in the very act of creating parody, Chevillard is inevitably creating autofiction. His ludic performance necessarily destabilises his texts, lending autofiction more instability in the genre. The next section will discuss whether the traditional structures of masculinity and femininity have also been destabilised in his texts.

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<sup>616</sup> Isabelle Rabadi, 'Palafox et Cie... L'animal dans l'écriture romanesque d'Éric Chevillard', in *Écrire l'animal aujourd'hui*, ed. by Lucile Desblache (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2006), pp. 103–112, (p. 104).

<sup>617</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

## Constructions of masculinity and femininity

Through the structures of language, Chevillard is attempting to parody autofiction, and yet questions remain as to how successful that has been. This chapter will now look at the ways in which Chevillard uses constructions of masculinity and femininity in his '*autofictif*' project. As Halberstam has stated:

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege.<sup>618</sup>

As masculinity is in a position of power and of dominance, autofiction is in a peculiar setting. I have argued that autofiction is a way to subvert the traditional forms of the novel and of autobiography; it is a challenge to the traditional positions of power. The very definition of autofiction seeks to disrupt and challenge the conventions of fiction and autobiography. I have suggested that autofiction is to some extent defined by a language game, and inherent within language is an inescapable power play between the structures of masculinity and femininity. It is particularly important in a genre so dependent on structures of traditional notions of autobiography and fiction that other structures of power are analysed. Furthermore, as I have shown in previous chapters, autofiction can be used as a way to challenge the traditional hegemonic position of masculinity itself. Gerschick writes:

In order to accomplish gender, each person in a social situation needs to be recognised by others as appropriately masculine or feminine. Those with whom we interact continuously assess our gender performance and decide whether we are 'doing gender' appropriately in that situation.<sup>619</sup>

Inevitably in the construction of a self, whether that of an autofictional, fictional or autobiographical persona the self must be gendered. Within this section, I will discuss whether the author uses traditional invocations of structure or whether the structures have been challenged in *L'autofictif*. Due to autofiction's curious relationship with its theorists of which the overwhelming majority are male, it is interesting to consider the

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<sup>618</sup> Halberstam, p. 1.

<sup>619</sup> Thomas Gerschick, 'Masculinity and Degrees of Bodily Normativity in Western Culture' in *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities*, ed. by Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and R.W. Connell (Thousand Oaks, California.; London: Sage, 2005), pp. 367–378 (p. 373).

implications of any challenge to traditional modes of masculinity and femininity. This chapter (and this thesis) does not argue that autofiction is a straight-forward challenge to masculinity, rather, that the project of autofiction presents a trend of challenge to traditional modes of narrative of which masculinity is inevitably a part. Of course, Chevillard's case is rendered more complex by the parodic nature of his autofiction which will be taken into account here.

## **Chevillard's body**

Autofiction's dependence on the relation between the main character, narrator and author invokes gender coding of the characters discussed in the texts. Each autofictional persona obeys or disobeys the stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity, although Chevillard's character gives very few physical gender clues to the reader. Without these, the reader is forced to rely more heavily on the picture of the author given on the author's website and the *L'autofictif* project is rendered more unstable. Of course, without this coding, the default position is masculine, something that Chevillard has stated in an interview. He said, '[l]e personnage masculin est plus neutre pour moi, comme un bonhomme de neige, si vous voulez'.<sup>620</sup> Chevillard uses the snowman to express a default character; a supposedly neutral character. The snowman, however, is by definition not a neutral figure; he is explicitly masculine and embodies the androcentric nature of language which can be easily seen as there is no such thing as 'bonne-femme de neige'. The body is a site of contest between traditional masculinity and femininity and Chevillard's use of bodies (both his and others) is notable, especially when his autofiction is contrasted with the other male author in this thesis, Philippe Vilain. '*L'autofictif*' is unique in this corpus due to its attention to the male body as a physical object by a male author.

Throughout the project, Chevillard's main character is coded as biologically male, although this is rarely done through the body itself. Instead, the character is inevitably coded through the gendered language he speaks and through speech acts. When his first-person narrator initially describes his body (almost eighteen months into the project), he invokes Doubrovskian imagery. The first mention of Doubrovsky's body in *Fils* is in opposition to the female body in a necrophilic dream sequence.<sup>621</sup>

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<sup>620</sup> Riendeau, '*Des leurres ou des hommes de paille. Entretien avec Éric Chevillard*', p. 12.

<sup>621</sup> Doubrovsky, *Fils*, pp. 15–17.

Chevillard's first-person narrator introduces the main character's body in a dream as follows:

Je montai à la tribune. En phrases vibrantes, j'exposai que les races et les frontières ne sont que des conventions saugrenues dont la mort se moquent bien, je démontrai preuves en main que les religions ne savent que jeter l'homme contre l'homme, enfin je serrai [sic] dans mes bras l'enfant, la fleur, l'océan, l'étoile et le grand singe roux. Puis mon corps lapidé, lacéré, criblé de balles, couvert de crachats, compissé et conchié copieusement fut restitué à ma famille honteuse qui l'enterra par une nuit sans lune dans une concession anonyme.<sup>622</sup>

It is interesting that one of the first mentions of Chevillard's body in the '*autofictif*' project should be part of a fictitious fragment; a dream sequence rather than as a description of his body. Adjectives used to describe the body are given by the actions done to the body. The violent imagery used such as the words, 'lapidé', 'lacéré' as well as the scatological references in 'compissé' and 'conchié' conjure a shocking image, and yet the appearance of the body is not described. These acts can be imagined on a fictional, ethereal body, but not a specific body of the main character or the narrator. Furthermore, the body is buried under cover of darkness by his family, suggesting that the physical presence of the body is also shameful and yet not specific to him. The body is not only fictional, but can be translated into any man's body in any man's tomb – there is no particularity of the main character. In a sense, Chevillard's depiction of the body here can be seen as an effacement of the body in a similar way Philippe Vilain's treatment of the body.

Shame and shock are the two overriding portrayals of Chevillard's coding of masculinity through the body. This is not the only time that the main character's body is given these attributes. Chevillard's depiction can also be explicit but differs significantly from Doubrovsky in that the coding of maleness can be done through the main character's penis which is not set in opposition to a female character. Chevillard writes:

Mon pénis ne se montre guère dans ces pages, discrétion regrettable car j'évoque ici un beau membre que ne déparent point ces veinules ni qui se bistourne ridiculement quand il s'érige. Mais voilà pour ma honte que je l'exhibe justement le jour où règne un froid polaire qui le réduit à presque

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<sup>622</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, pp. 156–157. The error in French is perhaps indicative of the immediate transposition from the blog in to a written text: a type of proof towards the claim that Chevillard does not edit his texts from the blog; they go directly from the blog to the book.

rien, un pauvre appendice contracté, contrit, un souvenir, un oisillon mort dans son nid.<sup>623</sup>

The main character's body is introduced in the fragment with the first word, 'mon', directly linking the penis to his body; this is not a generic symbol of maleness as the possessive adjective emphasizes the personal. The first-person narrator nuances this effect. He describes it as part of his shame as the only two personal pronouns tie 'mon pénis' and 'ma honte' together. Yet he also describes it as 'beau', juxtaposing shame and pride in the same short sentence. The main character's body therefore begins from a position of shame and emasculation, and it is immediately linked with 'almost nothing'. Chevillard's autofictional parody also lends an air of the ridiculous to his description of his penis further caricaturing the physical coding of masculinity. The penis is then connected with a dead chick in a nest, again emphasising death and shame. This effect is compounded when taken together with the consistently violent and shameful images given with other aspects of the main character's body. His parody of the physical coding of masculinity highlights the persistent issue with autofictional parody; if, as I have argued, the autofictional persona is at the centre of autofiction, how then can the autofictional text survive when the persona is parodied? Chevillard's violence towards his own authorial body can paradoxically be seen as strengthening his own autofictional body of the text. The body encapsulated in the autofictional persona rejects ties with the body grounded in extra-textual reality, creating a situation in which a body will be produced from the text. As Bruss writes with regards to the ludic text, 'The text's strategic design cannot be determined without the projected responses of another player, just as the image of an implied tactician, constructed from the workings of the text, is necessary to impel the reader's play.'<sup>624</sup> Her image of the implied tactician, in Chevillard's texts, creates the autofictional persona without his extra-textual body, but with his autofictional body. With each parodic utterance of a shamed and violent extra-textual body, Chevillard's autofictional persona creates his own textual body at odds with the extra-textual body.

Violence and shame in the body can be seen in the light of age. Chevillard displaces descriptions of the body in *L'autofictif voit une loutre*. He writes:

Dans cette pochette exhumée d'un carton, une vingtaine de clichés. Je suis photographié à Venise en octobre 96. Ah ça ! il est incontestable que la

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<sup>623</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif père et fils*, p. 77.

<sup>624</sup> Bruss, 'The Game of Literature and Some Literary Games', p. 162.



ville s'est sacrément dégradée depuis! Elle a perdu des cheveux et son front est à présent marqué de rides profondes.<sup>625</sup>

His body is not itself described, although reference to an imaginary photographic body is made. Furthermore, the fragment focusses on the degradation of the city, Venice, rather than discussing any mention of the character's body either at the time or in comparison with the present day. This obfuscation then, suggests a deliberate move away from the male body; a way both to discuss and to avoid the male body. Technical vocabulary used by Chevillard when describing other aspects of the male body reinforces this obfuscation creating a foil for the autofictional persona's textual body. Chevillard writes, 'Agathe, ma petite fille, mon agate, ma petite bille, prunelle de mes yeux, est-ce maladresse ou jalousie, pourquoi, d'un coup d'ongle, as-tu si cruellement lésé l'épithélium de mon globe oculaire gauche ?'.<sup>626</sup> The use of the word 'epithelium' immediately draws attention to the anatomical description of the body as a part of the eyeball – the tear becomes a source of medical interest rather than a useful aspect of the main character's development. Although the possessive adjective 'mon' is used to acknowledge ownership of his eyeball, the uncommon choice of word depicts this body as non-specific, and separated from the narrator. These three quotations taken together can further be seen as emblematic of the first-person narrator's displacement of his personal body for the perusal of the reader. When the foreword at the very start of the project is compared with this obfuscating stance, a number of points become clear.

Chevillard wrote in the foreword that:

Puis rapidement j'ai pris goût, et même un goût extrême, à cette forme d'intervention dans le deuxième monde que constitue aujourd'hui Internet, point si virtuel qu'on le dit, et à ces petites écritures libres de toute injonction. Avouerai-je que j'y retrouve non sans doute l'extase de mes premières brasses dans le liquide amniotique, une sensation euphorique qui remonte presque aussi loin, à mes premières tentatives poétiques ?<sup>627</sup>

Chevillard is inserting himself into one of the most identifiable trends within autofiction;<sup>628</sup> the sentiment of being reborn in a new character. The second life that Chevillard seems to experience is tied to a sentiment of being reborn in the Internet through amniotic fluid. Despite the necessity of a female body for the rebirth, no

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<sup>625</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif voit une loutre*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid., p. 233.

<sup>627</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif*, p. 7.

<sup>628</sup> As seen in the discussion of Philippe Vilain's texts.

mention is made of this. Chevillard has been reborn using his own power, effacing the feminine component and suggesting that his rebirth is produced entirely through himself. His textual body can be reborn from his autofictional persona, and recreated within the bounds of the text for each reader. His autofictional persona can create his own body, as a foil for his body situated in extra-textual reality.

## **Female characters**

Following in a tradition of autofiction, and a trend established in this thesis, Chevillard uses sexual imagery explicitly, echoing previous ‘impudeur’ in autofiction primarily from female writers such as Cusset and Millet. Despite the shame and often violent imagery present in Chevillard’s presentation of his main male character, the female characters do not appear to suffer the same fate. Chevillard’s descriptions of women in the ‘*autofictif*’ project can be narrowed into three groups. The first involves his two children, who happen to be female. The second group are widows, and the third group consists of all other women. This third group of women are described only through their bodies, and are expressed as vessels rather than cognitive beings. This section of the chapter will therefore discuss the three different groups of women to see the constructions of femininity that Chevillard employs.

As Chevillard’s project has been running since 2007, many changes in his life have occurred since the beginning. One of these changes involves the birth of two children and the subsequent insertion of their autofictional personae into the narrative. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Chevillard treats his characters’ bodies as objects and the personae of his daughters also receive this treatment. He writes, ‘[s]i tu veux laisser une trace de ton passage sur cette terre, plante un arbre, écris un livre, engendre un enfant, dit le sage, fais tout ce qui te plaira mais ne change jamais tes draps’.<sup>629</sup> As is often the case in Chevillard, his aphorism ends on a humorous note with the addition of an image depicting unwashed sheets as a way to leave a trace. His character’s daughters are treated as equivalent to planting a tree or writing a book, denying the specificity of their experience. Furthermore, the personae of Agathe and Suzie are often remarked upon by Chevillard as becoming part of his writing. The first-person narrator introduces the pregnancy announcement as a way of producing more texts. He writes: ‘une

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<sup>629</sup> Chevillard, *L’autofictif prend un coach*, p. 230.

deuxième fille va naître de mes œuvres, et l'on me chicane mon génie !<sup>630</sup> In an interesting parallel, both the main character and his child appear to have been born from the same texts. Nor is this the only time that writing and children are equated. Just over two weeks after that fragment, a new fragment states:

Je suis à la recherche d'un prénom pour ma fille à nature et d'un titre pour le livre en cours. S'il suffisait de créer.... Mais il faut encore donner un nom à nos créations, un nom qui ne les absorbe pas, qui ne les épuise pas, qui ne les aliène pas, qui ne les restreigne pas, qui ne soit ni un programme, ni une élucidation, un nom qui les distingue sans les damner, surtout pas le fin mot, un nom ouvert comme une question.<sup>631</sup>

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the first-person narrator attempts to resist categorisation for both his texts and his daughter. His list of negative criteria finishes with an attempt to keep both the title of the text and the name for his daughter ambiguous and open. The names for his new text and his new daughter do not appear to be approached differently, and each is treated as his creation. Attempts to resist categorisation can themselves be seen as a parody. Philippe Vilain, subject of a previous chapter, writes that autofiction itself can be defined by obfuscation and resistance to categorisation:

Ce qui fait la singularité de l'autofiction, c'est nous l'avons dit, son pacte contradictoire, son hybridité, son incapacité à opter pour le roman ou l'autobiographie, son *indécidabilité générique* qui interrogent les limites théoriques d'un roman à la première personne, dans lequel un narrateur assimilé à l'auteur prétend dire la vérité, derrière des événements et des faits réels.<sup>632</sup>

Chevillard's insertion of autofictional personae of his children in the text, therefore, reveals part of the parodic nature of his autofiction and equates the two concepts. The main character's children are also used as examples of autofictional language, in their own experience of language. Chevillard has already linked Agathe's conception and the creation of texts together when he ties her language further to his texts. He writes, '[A]gathe parle maintenant comme un livre – mais un livre de son père, la chère petite, si bien que je suis souvent seul à la comprendre (nous rions beaucoup)'.<sup>633</sup> Chevillard is also suggesting that his texts constitute a language amongst themselves; that they create

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<sup>630</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif père et fils*, p. 165.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>632</sup> Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 38.

<sup>633</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif père et fils*, p. 258.

their own images, links and metaphors; a secret language. Agathe's language and the first-person narrator's language become intertwined and are given form and body. Agathe's body in autofiction becomes more problematic as she is introduced as a minor character, and therefore cannot inhabit the same bodily space as her father.

Form and body become more important later in his texts which can be seen when the author attempts to introduce a body of a writer (and by extension his texts) to his daughter's soul. He states, '[i]l essaie d'introduire son gros corps d'écrivain pataud dans la jolie marinière de son âme d'enfant. Évidemment, toutes les coutures craquent'.<sup>634</sup> Once more, the narrator's body becomes fictional through the use of the subject pronoun 'il', and although the figures of a writer and his daughter can be conjectured as belonging to the personae of Chevillard and of Agathe, an element of doubt can be introduced. Furthermore, the very introduction of a bodily character serves to undermine Chevillard's autofictional text. The two bodies exist uneasily together precisely because the confines of the text have already forged the textual body of Chevillard. Agathe's body is new, and cannot be integrated successfully into the autofictional text given the necessity of the first-person autofictional persona. The negative imagery with a body is highlighted when in juxtaposition with his daughter, Agathe. Soul and body are conflated and this of course implies that the soul has a body from which it can split. Yet the body of the child is not described. Instead, Chevillard elides this problem by focussing on the writer who is described as both fat and oafish.

As Chevillard, the author, has aged during the process, he has focussed on his body as a way to discuss part of this change. Charnley writes that, 'the dominant discourse [on ageing is] ... resolutely negative and [serves] to reinforce prevailing prejudices'.<sup>635</sup> This analysis of the typical ageing male body by Charnley and others is not challenged in Chevillard. Typically, the ageing male body in Chevillard is seen as 'other' and in fact, the main character does not recognise his body as part of his construction, creating a level of dissonance between his external physical construction and his autofictional persona. The constant retrospective glances at his life are typical of autofiction and yet are unusual in the male authors studied in this thesis. He writes:

Courtoisement, je m'effaçai sur le seuil du café dans lequel j'allais entrer pour laisser passer cet homme d'âge mûr qui, lui, s'apprêtait à en sortir.  
Politesse élémentaire due à nos aînés et qui hélas se perd un peu

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<sup>634</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif voit une loutre*, p. 141.

<sup>635</sup> Charnley, 'Introduction: Representations of Age in European Literatures', p. 121.

aujourd'hui. Cependant, l'homme ne se décidant pas à pousser la porte, je fis un nouveau pas en avant, il en fit alors autant de son côté, et je fus bien obligé de convenir cette fois qu'il s'agissait de mon reflet sur la vitre.<sup>636</sup>

Chevillard's deference to his elders is misplaced as he has become one of the elders, although given Chevillard's relatively young age, again this is perhaps a parodic and self-ironising gesture. This understanding has come about through the viewing of an image of the author; the image of the author which is different to the one he has previously described. Furthermore, the ageing of the author again highlights the otherness of the author's personal image. All that the author has given is a description of the main character who can see an image, not a description of the image or of the main character. He is simply described in this extract as a man who is of a certain age.

Chevillard writes:

Quoi ? Incarne-t-il mon âme grise, ma mauvaise conscience ? Est-ce à lui que je devrais ressembler mon corps, rongé par mes vices secrets, ne mentait pas, offrant à de jeunes lectrices énamourées l'éblouissement de son immarcescible splendeur ?<sup>637</sup>

The man to whom Chevillard is referring here is the object of the previous fragment wherein Chevillard writes, '[l]'homme a le visage très ridé, le teint livide, une barbe blanche assez rase, une casquette et un coupe-vent noirs'.<sup>638</sup> The image of a man with many wrinkles and a white beard evokes an ageing man and when coupled with the fragment which follows it, the image turns into one of the main character with many vices and a grey soul. Furthermore, it is interesting that Chevillard uses the phrase 'grey soul' as this has no metaphorical meaning in French.<sup>639</sup> The grey soul becomes a way of describing the ageing process as well as the sins resting upon it. In this way, Chevillard connects age with his character's body, and hence to a negative image. Yet widows remain a surprising segment of his analysis of women. He states:

Les cheveux gris de très vieilles femmes peu à peu jaunissent. Quelques années encore, puis leurs seins gonflent et se raffermissent, leurs cuisses se galbent magnifiquement, leur chute de reins devient vertigineuse. On

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<sup>636</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif voit une loutre*, p. 131.

<sup>637</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif père et fils*, p. 20.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>639</sup> Although it is possible that Chevillard is referring to *Les âmes grises* by Philippe Claudel (Paris: Stock, 2003), the reference is somewhat obscure.

ignore souvent cela, mais la plupart des *bimbos* blondes aux mensurations de rêve sont centenaires.<sup>640</sup>

The reference to women as objects is complicated by the allusion to contemporary society in which women's measurements are routinely discussed as desirable and humour is added to the objectification of women. The effect, therefore, of treating the old women as objects in which only their physical appearances matter is nuanced. Furthermore, through this, the debate over the objectification of women is brought into the text. Somewhat surprisingly, this view also delivers a type of positive view of age in women in stark contrast to the negative views of age in men. Despite this, the women are still only treated according to their bodies, giving an overall negative view of widows. This appears to be the same case that is put forward about couples. Chevillard writes:

On se lamente sur l'usure du couple – les corps moins ardents, les prévenances plus rares – au lieu de saluer cette ultime et ultra-raffinée [sic] délicatesse des vieux amants qui sans le rompre laissent leur lien se distendre ainsi afin de ne pas se confisquer éternellement l'un l'autre, de libérer leur esprit et leur énergie de la monomanie amoureuse, de les rendre à nouveau disponible pour de nouvelles entreprises que cette exclusivité eût compromises. Car enfin, il n'y a pas que l'amour dans la vie (il y a aussi l'art, la rigolade et la masturbation).<sup>641</sup>

On the whole, at first glance, this appears to be a positive view of an old couple, and contrasts sharply with the negative imagery seen earlier relating to old men. On the other hand, the couple appear to have lost their subjectivity which is subsumed into the edifice of the couple. Thus the positive image given of an older couple becomes complicated by the lack of individual identity in the couple. The bodies of the aged couple are not described and so emphasis is placed on ephemeral qualities of love.

Chevillard's picture of age therefore shows the two sexes to be in stark contrast with old men treated in a much less positive light. When these two contrasting constructions of gender are shown, Duffy's depiction of age could be helpful in analysis. She writes that, '[s]ince old age is associated with the loss of both sexual attractiveness and prowess the elderly are unavoidably marginalised'.<sup>642</sup> This picture of

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<sup>640</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, p. 156.

<sup>641</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif voit une loutre*, p. 244.

<sup>642</sup> Helena Duffy, 'Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's *Babosya* and Andreï Makine's Novels', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 47 (2011), pp. 157–169 (p. 158).

age is seen in Chevillard's depiction of male ageing, and yet the experience of female ageing complicates the picture. Once the couple are put together, however, a different image emerges creating one where although subjectivity is subsumed into the couple, the overall picture is of marginalisation.

Finally, Chevillard also classifies women into the category of object or of vessel. The introduction of new characters sparks changes in the texts although, as mentioned previously, one character who is never introduced is the mother of his children. The conception of the main character's eldest daughter is related as follows: '[l]e spermatozoïde était pourtant bien ce vilain têtard qu'un baiser changea en princesse Agathe'.<sup>643</sup> As noted above, no mention is made of the character's partner, echoing the way in which Chevillard expressed his rebirth into a 'second life' through the Internet, effacing female bodies. She has no agency and no place in the text except as a vessel to carry his children. All words explaining the act are related to the male character's experience such as 'spermatozoïde', 'têtard' and 'baiser'. With the explicit nature of the fragment, the conception also parallels the episodes described earlier in Catherine Cusset's *Jouir* creating an odd symmetry between conception and 'impudeur'. In *Jouir*, however, the protagonist is female, and is always seen to be in control of her sexuality yet there is no such display of sexuality here. Agathe's conception is described as if it was happening without protagonists; the 'baiser' took place, and then a child resulted. Despite no mention of the character's body, again Chevillard ascribes male bodily characteristics to his main character simultaneously effacing both the feminine and obfuscating his character's body. The mother figure, however, is not the only representation of women that has vessel status in his project. Chevillard uses female figures to discuss and parody events, writing:

Ma foi, elle se découvre un vrai petit talent pour le tennis de plage, un bon coup de raquette qui commence d'ailleurs à attirer les curieux. Les hommes ralentissent, s'arrêtent ; ces spectateurs la stimulent, elle court, saute, se cambre, ses frappes sont nettes et précises. Son maillot de bain est transparent.<sup>644</sup>

At the beginning of the anecdote given above, the technical prowess of the player at beach tennis appears at first glance to be celebrated. Yet this prowess is undermined by the use of the word 'petit' directly before the 'talent' infantilising the 'talent' and

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<sup>643</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif voit une loutre*, p. 191.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

downplaying the prowess. The second sentence of the anecdote relates the specifically male attention that the woman receives whilst that the third indicates that the woman's technical prowess was not the quality that should be admired. Instead, she should be admired for wearing a transparent bikini and she is therefore playing tennis almost naked. Her subjectivity is inherently reduced from an active participant into an object. The figure of a young woman, created as an object is a recurring theme in Chevillard's work. In this example, he parodies contemporary reception of women, writing:

Il s'agit d'être une belle jeune femme de vingt-deux ans. Tout concourt en ce monde à faire de cet état un idéal. Notre bonheur varie en fonction de la distance qui nous en sépare. Pour moi, homme âgé de quarante-six ans, j'en suis fort éloigné, certes, mais je vis avec une femme de trente-six ans qui en est plus proche que bien d'autres, je suis père de deux fillettes qui auront un jour vingt-deux ans....<sup>645</sup>

Again, the idea of the first-person narrator's children as a part of women-to-be instead of children obfuscates organisation and is emblematic of Chevillard's constant refusal to be categorised. The first-person narrator has constructed the fragment around the original premise that women are valued only for their age and their beauty. Although the fragment is composed around a self that has control over their subjectivity, the self is only valued in relation to the women he can attract, and the production of two more children who will perpetuate the validation of a male entity. His first-person narrator therefore, only gains subjectivity with the addition of female objects, demonstrating a complex view of masculinity and femininity wherein both entities are lacking full subjectivity without the other, but female objects can never attain the status of subjects.

Chevillard's relationship with male and female characters can therefore be seen both as challenging gender norms and upholding them. Chevillard's male body is almost entirely effaced from the texts, leaving a disembodied split-self reinforcing the male character in a position of hegemony. His autofictional body that has been created through the texts as a vessel for his autofictional persona is entirely disassociated from his extra-textual body. Yet this inevitably leaves the reader in the position of arbiter and creator of the autofictional body. Authorial control over the body is entirely relinquished in the ludic text and given to the reader. In Bruss' conception of ludic texts she writes that games produce an equal relationship of power as both parties are

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<sup>645</sup> Chevillard, *L'autofictif prend un coach*, p. 208.



subordinated to the game.<sup>646</sup> Yet here, the author is subordinate to the reader's conception of his autofictional persona and body. In the end, the only female characters that are allowed to have agency and control over their bodies are Agathe and Suzie, his daughters. All other female characters are designated as vessels with no agency, and although the writing coach appears at first glance to be able to control Chevillard's character, by the end of the text this is no longer true. In fact, the writing coach becomes almost an extreme embodiment of femininity and as such loses her place in the narrative. Chevillard's complex relationship with women is suddenly rendered less so as gender norms are re-established. By the end of the five texts studied, there is no innovative change to the way in which male and female characters are viewed; they are simply responding to gender norms.

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<sup>646</sup> Bruss, 'The Games of Literature and Some Literary Games', p. 158.

## Conclusion

With the combination of different types of media, such as the fable, poetry and a melding of autobiographical and fictional devices, Chevillard's project has brought together diverse forms to create an unusual form of autofiction. Éric Chevillard's original aim for the '*autofictif*' project was to parody autofiction through the use of narrative strategies, lexical choices and content. Furthermore, Chevillard's specificity and originality lies in his parodic approach. His parody of a highly self-reflexive genre means implicating his own autofictional persona within the text, creating an inherent unease. This unease is magnified in autofiction due to the insertion of extra-textual events within the text and the implications of using his autofictional persona to parody his character, destroying credibility and the performance of his persona. Without the lynch-pin of his autofictional persona to hold his autofiction together, Chevillard's autofiction must necessarily fail. Far from destroying autofiction, however, parody has strengthened and enlarged the ludic autofictional field. Within the ludic text, Bruss has suggested that both the reader and the author have equal shares in power, and that both are subordinated to the text.<sup>647</sup> Yet with the construction of an autofictional persona that in turn creates its own body through each reader, the reader is left as the ultimate arbiter of the text. This position creates a much stronger conception of an autofictional persona which to some extent is defined by the reader, rather than the author.

Chevillard's use of his extra-textual body has been used to create an illusion of an insertion of a male body. Whilst other characters have been introduced to Chevillard's texts, there is a tension between their construction and that of Chevillard's persona. These other characters demonstrate the extent to which Chevillard's autofiction creates his autofictional persona in a self-referential cycle. When other characters are included, such as the coach, they serve to highlight the persona's construction. The coach can be seen as a foil for the developed persona. In *L'autofictif prend un coach*, the coach is seen to transcend reality and become a saint-like creature in direct contrast to the autofictional persona. It is the contrast that enables the persona to be fully established within the text, and to be constructed by the reader.

Éric Chevillard's '*autofictif*' project has created a new form of parodic autofiction, using fictional, autofictional and autobiographical devices to parody the

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<sup>647</sup> Bruss, 'The Game of Literature and Some Literary Games', p. 158.

‘literature of the trivial’. In each form of parody, Chevillard has used his autofictional persona to access different parts of autofiction from the banal to the homogenisation of female characters, transforming the genre. Yet Chevillard’s parody has itself been recuperated within autofiction, yielding a greater ludic field in which the genre can evolve and grow.

## Conclusion

Autofiction's development from theoretical possibility to a genre that now encompasses texts, filmic representations, photography and theoretical investigations, gives contemporary French literature new avenues in which to examine aspects of the self. Whilst there have been many explorations of theoretical autofiction, as well as attribution of autofiction to well-established authors such as Colette and Proust, very few contributions have focused on contemporary practitioners of autofiction. Much research has already been done to 'relate them [autofiction's premises] to "safe" (male/canonical) authors'.<sup>648</sup> For the first time, I have attempted to contextualise the debates in autofiction with four contemporary autofictional writers and to establish the autofictional persona as the lynch-pin of autofiction. Each chapter discussed the varying ways in which each author has chosen to perform their autofiction, both via language and their depictions of gender, central to discussions of the self. They also exhibit signs of ludic performance that has been missed by previous autofictional theorists. As these autofictional authors gain in prominence, studies of their work will be vital in analysing their contributions to the contemporary French literary landscape.

Throughout this thesis, I have identified three key trends that help constitute the genre of autofiction. The first of these is through the performance of the autofictional persona which in turn creates an autofictional body. Given the simultaneous access to fictional and referential spheres that underpins autofiction's construction, autofictional personae use the text as a vessel they can inhabit. From each text, the reader constructs the autofictional body of the persona. These bodies function more coherently when combined with extra-textual references from an extra-textual reality. This web of references reinforces the autofictional body, giving it a stronger structure.

Secondly, all writers studied in this thesis demonstrate the ludic nature of autofiction. Although each version of the ludic text varies from author to author, all participate in an autofictional game. Ludic texts focus on 'experiment and artifice',<sup>649</sup> whether through narrative strategies, reader participation or literary devices such as parody. Whilst experimentation with ludic texts such as the *Corpus Simsi* project in Chloé Delaume's œuvre are obvious, there are frequently more complex games at play in autofiction such as Philippe Vilain's intertextual game with Annie Ernaux. Indeed, it

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<sup>648</sup> Jordan, 'État Présent: Autofiction in the Feminine', p. 77.

<sup>649</sup> Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction*, p. 18.

is my contention that autofiction is a ludic genre. Autofiction's ludic trends give voice to the interplay between referential and fictional spheres that are critical to the genre.

Thirdly, all four autofictional authors have been found to engage in intertextual plays, unsurprising given Grell's article demonstrating Doubrovsky's intertextual references,<sup>650</sup> yet still important to note given the paucity of scholarship available on the authors studied in this thesis. In Cusset, intertextual material is vital in discerning the performance of autofiction itself. Furthermore, in her work, intertext seems to lend itself more easily to a type of intra-text, and this is a trait replicated in other authors in this thesis, most notably in Philippe Vilain and Chloé Delaume's texts. In Chevillard's case, the use of intertextual material reveals an attempt to parody other writers' work such as Alexandre Jardin. With Vilain, intertextual references function to create a space of intertextual dialogue with Annie Ernaux's public works, and to drive his theoretical texts. Yet the most powerful representation of intertextual references in this thesis is Delaume's performance of her phrase, '[j]e m'appelle Chloé Delaume'. This phrase, repeated at different moments throughout her œuvre performs her autofictional persona at the same time as creating a sense of cohesion in her œuvre. I argue that intertextual references are one of the ways that autofictional writers destabilise autofiction within the context of an already destabilising genre. Thus, from genre construction to performance of the autobiographical characters and intertextual references, instability is present in all aspects of the genre.

In Cusset's texts, autofiction's crossover with fiction is portrayed. Cusset's use of paratextual elements to provide differing readings of the text create a game with the reader and with each addition to her corpus, the game expands exponentially. Her construction of femininity through motherhood further plays with the limits of autofictional production. Cusset's sexualised body in her ground-breaking text, *Jouir*, creates the first step in understanding this autofictional performance and her innovation with her autofictional persona continued with the inclusion of photography in *New York, journal d'un cycle*, reinforcing an autofictional trend of multi-media experimentation.

Following Cusset's exploration of the porous limits between fiction and autofiction, Vilain's texts represent a move to focus more strongly on the limits of the autobiographical persona, and the possibilities it can produce. Vilain's unique original position as a character in Annie Ernaux's texts helps to produce an autofictional persona

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<sup>650</sup> Isabelle Grell-Feldbrügge, 'Serge Doubrovsky : Autofiction et intertexte ou "Comment devient-on l'inventeur de l'autofiction ?"', in *Autofiction(s)*, p. 23.

that is grounded in more than one literary dimension. Through the repetition of character traits, and a strong inter-relation between theoretical and practical autofiction, Philippe Vilain's persona functions within his texts to explore the possibilities of interactions with his readers. Vilain's homogenisation of female characters focuses further attention on his autofictional persona, showing a sharp contrast between female characters and the persona.

Chloé Delame represents the ultimate case of autofictional performance. Instead of performance through a body, her autofictional body is entirely composed of the text, rather than situated in the real. In a sense therefore, her body is the text, and performance is dictated through speech acts rather than a tangible medium. Her avatar is entirely composed through electronic space rather than through a person, and indeed more than one person could 'play' with the persona during her experiment detailed in *Corpus Simsi*. It is Delaume's texts that offer the greatest scope to represent autofiction in a ludic capacity. Her use of games as texts such as *La nuit je suis Buffy Summers*, online avatar and plethora of characters engaged in her autofictional enterprise comprise an over-arching project to play with the limits of autofiction, genre and autobiographical personae. Her intervention in the genre creates an innovative space in which to examine autofiction and concepts of selfhood.

Finally, Chevillard's project is the most obviously ludic in its construction of autofiction thanks to its emphasis on parody, as well as his use of poetry and aphorisms to encapsulate the perceived banality of autofiction. Yet due to this very parodic aspect, Chevillard's autofictional persona is suspect. His autofictional project is thus caught between parody and autofiction, with the persona in doubt. References to his fictional texts, publications, and his daughters help to anchor his persona in his autofictional texts. Although Chevillard parodies the banal and often explicit nature of autofiction, his autofictional persona is deeply implicated in the endeavour, thus recuperating his autofictional persona into autofiction. Given the longevity of Chevillard's '*autofictif*' project, his autofictional parody has turned into autofiction, influencing the direction of the genre.

Many exciting questions remain amid the proliferation of autofictional and experimental texts, particularly with new forms of media. More questioning will be necessary in order to discover the full ludic capabilities of autofiction in the contemporary French literary scene as well as the limits of performativity within a relatively new genre. Autofiction's use of the text as autofictional body creates new

facets in the understanding of the self, as well as new avenues to pursue within the fledgling genre.

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